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ELIOT THE YOUNGER.

A Fiction in Frechand.

BY

BERNARD BARKER.

“For several virtues
Have I liked several women
“Without the which, this story
Were most impertinent.”
Tempest (Act iii., sc. 1.—Act i., sc. 2.).

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



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TO
ALICE
AND
ARTHUR PAGE.

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ELIOT THE YOUNGER.



CHAPTER I.

THE COMING MAN.

DICK ELIOT, our hero, was christened after Dick Steele, Addison's good-for-little fag and friend. Of Steele, as a schoolboy, Thackeray tells much the same tale as we are obliged to tell of his humble namesake—*videlicet*, he was notoriously idle; was whipped deservedly a great many times; and, indeed, was continually coming to the flogging-block. "He

had very good parts of his own," adds the idler's biographer ; but, alas ! it seems only in a corporeal sense that these were brought to light by his preceptors.

So it was with our Dick. Everybody admitted that "that boy of Eliot's" (Eliot of The Leas) was an intelligent lad enough, but the mischief was that his schoolmasters could make nothing of him, save and except an example.

As regards lessons, no youthful Bæotian, hopelessly acclimatised, and dulled by the thickness of his native air, could have been more sluggish, more muddle-headed. So little did he flourish under the ferule, that his father, in his whimsical way, was wont to say Dick's Upas-tree was the birch.

Not that Eliot *père*—careless and clever, a dreamer of dreams and a colourer of pipes—greatly took to heart his son's academic failings. Rather on the contrary. A theory

of his (one of many) was that almost all brilliant men were but dull boys, and amid his multitude of favourite projects was the idea of compiling a History of Illustrious Dunces. For this embryonic work he had already enrolled a strong host of supporters—Swift, Steele, Goldsmith, Sheridan, Scott, Burns, Babbage, Marryatt, Newton, Napoleon, Wellington, Clive, Grant, and Bismarck being among the ranks of his recruits; but, although his forces were thus mustered, they had not hitherto been brought into action, nor did there seem any immediate likelihood of their being called upon for active service.

“Dick!” Mr. Eliot would exclaim, on any remonstrance at the lad’s laziness; “why, what’s the matter with Dick? To my mind, he possesses all, or nearly all, that goes to form The Perfect Boy—Helps’s arch-urchin! He consumes meat and sleep in large and regular instalments; he has severely licked

young Billy Bullimore, the keeper's son ; he has robbed, artistically and impartially, all neighbouring nests and orchards ; he shies stones as effectively as did David himself ; and he carries a four-bladed knife, two fish-hooks, a piece of whipcord, sundry buttons, a bottle of liquorice-water, three-ha'porth of gunpowder, and eleven bits of slate-pencil in his trouser-pockets. What more *can* you ask of one at his age ?"

Time passed. The seasons came and went. Spring, a young mother, with tender firstlings at her breast and a lapful of baby-blossoms ; Summer, the ripe-lipped matron, laughing at her brood of rosy beauties ; Autumn, the maiden aunt, captious, capricious, and queer of temper—now smiling, now scolding at her dead sister's legacy ; lastly, Winter, the shrill-voiced step-dame, beneath whose iron rule and cold continual frown the poor little orphans wither and die, and the world looks

bare and hopeless. Ah me! what seasons they were, those seasons of our childhood. What suns in July, what snows in December. Is summer still as bright, winter as white, as of yore? Do the larks and thrushes sing as sweetly, do the waits play as delightfully—half as delightfully?—as in the days and nights gone by? *Dis done!* my brother of five-and-forty, my sister of five-and——

Well, well! The whole subject is fraught with pain and perplexity, and deuce knows where 'twould land us. Dick Eliot, at least, was in the happy heyday of his youth, and disported himself after the unthinking, midge-like manner of his years.

“Th’ young marster,” quoth the keeper, with the true East-Anglian drawl, “fare to be afoot a’most orl the day, tharra’ due!” and, certainly, throughout his holidays, our hero was but little within doors. From dawn to dusk—“from the rising of the lark to the lodging of

the lamb"—he would roam the neighbouring woods and meadows in quest of adventure, eating an abnormal quantity of blackberries, and consuming hips and haws with the unreasoning voracity of a hedge-sparrow. The pleasures of the plain (*Norfolk is flat*) were his in abundance. At fourteen he became the proud possessor of horse and gun, which he kept in constant exercise, as ubiquitous as the Uhlan with the one, as lawless as the Franc-Tireur with the other; and at sixteen he left school to read for a term with the Reverend Paul Boddyman, rector of his native parish, previous to entering college.

One wild October afternoon, a month or so after his emancipation from Rugby, Dick Eliot was drifting about the rambling grounds that extended from the front of his father's house to the highway. Along the left side of these grounds, and dividing them from a small pasture called the "Home Piece," was a

row of gigantic poplars, through whose gusty spires the west wind was now roaring and swirling with a sea-like sublimity of sound. A flying sky—ragged with shifting squadrons of clouds, that sped silently and sullenly across it, like the forlorn fugitives of a broken army—was overhead; the air was in a whirl of falling, eddying leaves; the unlatched door of an adjacent hen-house was dashing itself madly against the wall, whilst the hens themselves, with upturned feathers, like upturned garments, were scuttling to and fro, ruffled out of all shape and decency.

In the midst of this breeding tumult and twilight, whittling a fresh-cut stick with a good deal of aimless energy, anon pausing to gaze absently up at the black colony founded by the rooks in the giddy, wind-rocked elms, Dick Eliot placidly awaited the wonted six-o'clock summons to dinner, which, either by

sound of bell or word of mouth, he relied would duly reach him.

Not a bad-looking youngster, by any means, was our hero at sixteen. Plenty of elastic life in his limbs, plenty of pluck in the outlook of his clear, grey eyes, plenty of humanity, warm and womanly (perhaps too warm, too womanly) in his heart, and a good deal of unbroached ability in his head. At school he had very properly been pronounced a dunce—an epithet he had earned, however, not through incapacity, but through simple idleness and the lack of that appreciation for learning which only comes to us when our best opportunities are gone by, man's taste for solid book-lore being for the most part an essentially artificial and acquired one.

But although Dick had stopped his ears, Ulysses-like, to the voice of that matter-of-fact syren, Minerva, he had by no means

wholly ignored literature. His bye-reading, indeed, had been close and varied. From eight to ten years of age he had slain giants with Jack, championed forlorn damsels, rescued princesses, and been a very Brigham Young of bigamy in the number of his marriages with kings' only daughters. From ten to twelve he had followed the profession of a Boy Hunter or Young Yager, scientifically potting the beast of the field; and anon, by way of obituary, enlivening the camp-fire with instructive scraps from the natural history of the deceased, setting forth his habits as he lived, and shrewdly exposing all his little ways and weaknesses, after the well-known yager wont.

From twelve to fourteen he had lived at open warfare with that section of coloured humanity known as the Redskin, bagging buffaloes, and "whipping his weight" into grizzly bears whenever Crow or Pawnee was

not at hand, or the prairie didn't happen to be on fire.

From fourteen upwards, his previous roving life in literature would seem to have unsettled him for any fixed calling. He laughed at locksmiths with Ainsworth's "Jack Sheppard;" made love and prize-money with Marryatt's midshipmen; fought and bled (profusely) with Lever's ensigns and Grant's peninsular veterans; dined, drank, and duelled with Dumas' immortal musketeers.

Arrived at sixteen he had almost grown callous to the battle, murder, and sudden death of familiar fiction, and the most moving accidents by flood and field were not now moving enough to kindle him as of yore. Like the little girl who decided that the world was hollow because she discovered that her doll was stuffed with sawdust, a certain premature scepticism had crept in upon him. Those military Crichtons, those gods and

heroes of the backwoods and the prairies, were gradually regarded with the cold eye of suspicion, and their reputation, sensitive as a woman's, withered beneath the unkindly shadow of doubt. The old idols were overthrown and shattered: Dick was waiting for new ones.





CHAPTER II.

FAMILY AFFAIRS.

DOOOR Mrs. Draycott being dead, there were little Dora and the four others thrown on the hands of that inefficient father of theirs—hands lifted in mute but eloquent protest at the unexpected magnitude of their charge. We say unexpected, for even had Mr. Draycott known, he had never until now realised, the fact of having five children. It was as though they had all come to him—a quintette of overgrown babies—at a birth. Sitting beside his afflicted hearth, and hearing the voices of the youngsters in the garden, the

widower plaintively owned that the world was one—or rather several—too many for him. “Blessed is the man that hath his quiver full of them,” murmured the rector, with that want of tact so characteristic of our would-be consolers on such occasions ; but, like Rachel mourning for her children, Mr. Draycott had refused to be comforted—with the difference that, ‘whereas Rachel lamented their absence, Mr. Draycott deplored their presence. They were an embarrassment of riches that at once dazed and depressed him.

Considering the nature of the man, weak and comfort-loving as it was, it can scarcely be wondered at that the idea of shifting his burden to other shoulders by means of a second marriage should early have occurred to him.

“Some nice, quiet, healthy, homely, respectable person,” mused Mr. Draycott,

“who would see that the children had what they wanted, and who wouldn't mind taking them to church, and—er—and going with them in the way they should go——Dear, dear ! what a blessing such a one would be ! what a boon for *them* ! what a relief for *me* !”

Had Sydney Draycott been a less indolent individual, he might possibly have met with the object of his desires, or something sufficiently approaching it, among the maiden ladies of the county families ; but although a zealous and artistic diner, he was not much of a diner-out, nor did he greatly advocate either the paying or receiving of visits. Surrounded by his books — such pleasing classics, for example, as *Les Lettres Athéniennes* and *Le Sopha*, of M. Crébillon *fils*, with the more curious productions of current French romance continually arriving—surrounded by such works, and by a choice sketch or two after the “fleshly” school of

Etty smiling at him from the walls, Draycott of Draycott Manor was content to play the recluse. Hitherto the discreet management of his deceased partner—a clever and practical woman—had secured him against the invasion of those young barbarians, his children; but now, on a sudden, all this was changed. The acquaintance of his offspring was, in a measure, forced on him. The mother being gone, they turned, with the unreasoning instinct of the lower animals, to their surviving parent. It is obvious, then, how seriously he was affected by his wife's loss.

In this emergency he applied to his cousin, Mrs. Eliot of The Leas, who, amongst other things, impressed him with the necessity of engaging a governess for the training of his olive branches, the two eldest, Dora and Tom (twins), being already in their tenth year, and sadly needing some substitute for the maternal guidance they had lost.

“As you will, my dear cousin, as you will,” conceded Mr. Draycott, with an edifying air of resignation; “a governess be it. I’m sure if the—er—the children want such a thing, their father is the last person to make any objection. Nobody shall accuse me of being other than an indulgent parent. Let them have a governess, by all means.”

“If they cried for the moon you’d give it ’em, wouldn’t you, Draycott?” said Mr. Eliot, lazily lifting his blue eyes as he spoke. “Only to cry for the moon—the days of Endymion being over—is rather an anachronism. Here’s the rector, however; perhaps he can help us to an eligible young woman.”

“Not *too* young, Charles,” softly interposed Mrs. Eliot, laying her hand on her husband’s arm.

“My dear, I said an *eligible* young woman. If she were *too* young she wouldn’t be

eligible, of course. Well, Boddymen? Can you recommend anyone?"

But the rector (a large, full-blooded man, amiably orthodox) was unable to assist them out of their difficulty, and suggested the expedience of having recourse to the columns of the *Times*.

"Sweet are the uses of advertisement," said Mr. Eliot. "What do *you* think, Draycott?"

"My dear fellow, let me be left entirely on one side. Don't consult, don't consider *me* in the slightest—*pas le moindre du monde*, as we used to say in—er—in Paris. The children's welfare above all. Whatever little sacrifices I may be called on to make are—er—are nothing. Act, my friends, as though Sydney Draycott were not."

"The best thing, perhaps, we could do," muttered Mr. Eliot, *sotto voce*.

"*My* requirements," continued the widower,

irrepressibly full, as usual, of himself, "are few and easily satisfied. What those requirements are, you already know. Seclusion, simplicity, literature, and—er—and the arts." (Here a graceful flourish of Sydney Draycott's white hand indicated the bookcase and the portraits of nymphs *au naturel* that embellished the walls.) "Indeed, I occasionally court the Muse myself. *Tenui musam*, Boddyman, *meditamur avena*."

"*Meditamur avena*," murmured the rector, thinking of his own small literary and domestic difficulties; and thereat, or shortly after, the conference was broken up, it being finally decided that the agency of the *Times* should be invoked on behalf of the little Draycotts and their educational wants, whilst the widower's eldest sister, a maiden lady, should be invited, *pro tem.*, to superintend the household.

Some three weeks after the foregoing con-

versation, a governess was secured—a Miss Lydia Brooke. This lady, well recommended as to character and capacity, was stated to be in her eight-and-twentieth year, and admirably adapted for the situation she had sought. Her arrival was announced for the 10th of October—the day on which our hero was presented to the reader in the garden at The Leas; and it was during dinner, on the evening of that same day, that Dick Eliot found himself personally concerned in her coming.

How this happened may be told in half-a-dozen words.

Mr. Draycott, needing his carriage and coachman for his own convenience (the 10th being the date of some special musical assembly at Norwich), found himself unable to send over to Hethercote Station to meet the train by which Miss Brooke was expected to arrive. Thus situated, he despatched a

delicately perfumed note to his neighbour and connexion, Charles Eliot, elaborately explanatory of his dilemma, and ingenuously asking assistance out of it.

“A begging-letter, my dear,” said Mr Eliot, tossing the missive across the dinner-table to his wife. “Is it a case of real distress, or merely an imposition?”

“Why in the world doesn’t Cousin Sydney send one of his own people?” asked Mrs. Eliot, glancing through the note. “It’s really quite too provoking he should be continually applying to us for things! Whatever you may answer now, Charles, another time I do hope you’ll avoid giving way in the slightest to such unreasonable appeals.”

“My dear, I’ll be firm as a rock, inflexible as Rhadamanthus’ self—another time. Just at present, however, I think we may as well be indulgent. You see, he says the dog-cart is out of repair, and the children’s basket-

trap—what does he say about the basket-trap?”

“Oh, some frivolous excuse or other. But whom have we to send, Charles? There’s old Jordan’s bad leg——”

“Can’t send that,” interjected Mr. Eliot, in a tone of grave remonstrance.

“Don’t be absurd, sir. Then there’s Bullimore is engaged, and as for Simmons, you know——”

“I’ll go,” said Dick, suddenly looking up from his soup. “Simmons can harness Atalanta in the dog-cart, and she’ll take me to Hethercote in a jiffy.”

“One jiffy equals twenty minutes, doesn’t it, Dick?” asked his father. “It’s so long you see, since I went to school, that I quite forget my tables of measurement. Do you remember, Mrs. Eliot, the value of a jiffy?”

“Really, Charles, I wish you would show a little less levity—at least, at meals. It’s

quite the same whether we are alone, as now, or whether we have servants in the room. And servants, you should recollect, are so apt to misinterpret that kind of thing. Besides, as I've repeatedly told you, that thoughtless cracking of jokes has long since ceased to be considered good style. I'm sure you heard nothing of the sort at Lady Muffle Drummond's the other evening."

"I didn't indeed!" sighed Mr. Eliot, looking blank at the recollection. "Anything more funereal, more soul-depressing, more calculated to age a man than her ladyship's dinners, it would be simply impossible to survive. What with the heavy dishes and discourse at table, and the dirgelike singing and playing of the Misses Muffle Drummonds afterwards, those gatherings at the Hall are the very abomination of desolation—most musical, most melancholy!"

"Charles, you surprise me! Pray re-

member of whom you are speaking ! I think we had better change the subject."

"With all my heart, my dear Alicia. About meeting Miss What's-her-name, the governess, then ? I suppose Dick may as well go ?"

"Of course he must go, if there's absolutely no one else at hand ; but I *will* say it's rather too bad that the task of fetching this Miss Brooke should be left to him. Besides, it looks so odd."

Mr. Eliot wisely forebore prolonging the discussion, and, dinner being ended, Dick withdrew to superintend the harnessing of his mare Atalanta, a lean-headed, rakish-looking chestnut, behind whose nimble heels he was shortly scudding rapidly along the dark cross-country roads on his way to Hethercote station.



CHAPTER III.

IN WHICH WE MEET MISS BROOKE.

THE clamorous wind-chorus that all the afternoon had been gathering in sound and fury was now thundering tumultuously across the flat league of land that lay between Dick Eliot and the sea. But even above the hubbub of the gale Dick fancied, from time to time, he could catch the hoarse undertone of ocean, whose trampling surges were for ever sucking and sapping the cliff-line of the bleak east coast, and the odour of whose foam-flecked breakers blew so freshly on his face.

With his hat drawn down, his coat-collar

turned up, and the rays of the gig-lamps gleaming along the shuddering hedges, our hero sped swiftly forward, by farm and homestead, anon rousing the surly challenge of some kennelled yard-dog, or awaking a drowsy cock to premature crowing. Past Draycott Manor, with its leaf-littered avenue and cowering shrubberies; past the gabled rectory, all a-shiver in its garniture of ivy; past the dark church, and on through the solitary street of the village; until at length the lights of Hethercote station flashed before him, and he pulled up his mare with the comfortable conviction that, considering the weather, they had done the distance in remarkably good time.

Leaving horse and trap in charge of a convenient rustic, Dick entered the station, and made his way to the outer platform, which the wind had swept clear of all save one tenacious porter—a semi-seafaring individual

(like most of the natives of the neighbourhood), who took the gales the gods provided in a spirit of stolid acquiescence.

“Rough night, porter!”

“Ay, ay, sir! Coarse times out yinder;” and the man nodded his head significantly coastward. “They ha’ got their hands full theer, yow may take *yor* Bible oath! T’ain’t orl on ’em, *I’ll* lay, as ’ll see daylight agin i’ this warld.”

The pregnant simplicity of the speaker’s words, tragic in their very homeliness, was a characteristic of local speech Dick had not often met with and marked. The poetry of English provincialism lingers yet among these unvarnished men of the coast, who dwell ever within sound of the sea, and live to learn the meaning of its many voices. Dick would willingly enough have continued the conversation, but just then the approach of the expected train was signalled by the prolonged

scream of the labouring engine, which, panting and puffing, dragged its passive retinue of carriages slowly up to the side of the little platform.

“Heth’cote, Heth’cote, Heth’cote!” roared the seafaring porter, in a hoarse, stentorian voice (as one who shouteth “ship a-hoy”), and heads were popped out of successive carriage-windows with the mechanical alacrity of a conjuring trick.

What Dick looked for in the new governess was (as he mentally phrased it) “a thin and thirtyish sort of woman,” severe and sober-hued as an owl of Minerva; such, in fact, as he had seen at Lady Muffle Drummond’s, in the person of that Arid One who, erewhile, imparted knowledge to her ladyship’s minor daughters. Nobody, however, of this description appeared to be present, and Dick moved from one end of the train to the other without encountering anything resembling

the preconceived object of his search. Meanwhile, sundry inhabitants of Hethercote and the adjoining parishes had alighted from the carriages — farming-folk mostly — who betrayed a respectful recognition of “Young Squire Eliot o’ The Leas,” as they passed him on their way out. Seeing that he had no time to lose, Dick began to “try back,” taking a rapid glance at each compartment in traversing anew the platform. Cattle dealers, “commercial,” fish salesmen, manufacturers, marketers, pork-butchers, poulterers and—

“I beg your pardon——”

(It was the end of an umbrella that touched him, and it was a woman’s voice that addressed him. Dick halted abruptly.)

“Excuse my asking ; but do you happen to come from Mr. Draycott—from Draycott Manor ?”

“Yes,” said Dick, bowing, and, to tell the truth, blushing. “Miss Brooke, I believe ?”

“Exactly ; Miss Brooke, as you say. But only fancy, I’ve just dropped my ticket here somewhere, and, do you know, I can’t find it anywhere. Suppose you jump in—you don’t mind, do you?—and help me to look for it.”

A clear, voluble utterance—slightly foreign in its accent—expressive eyes, and manner, unreserved, unaffected to a fault.

Dick at once opened the door and entered the compartment, of which Miss Brooke, it seemed, had hitherto been the sole occupant. Under the cushions, under the seats, under package and parcel, in every place possible and impossible, did Dick Eliot and his companion seek for the missing ticket—but all unavailingly. So zealous, indeed, was their search, so earnest and engrossing, that neither noticed, until it was too late for remedy, that the train had once more been set in motion, and that it was now gliding stealthily from

out the station. Had Dick been alone, he would have risked the leap to the ground without hesitation, but for a lady such a step was obviously impracticable.

Dick looked at Miss Brooke; Miss Brooke looked at Dick. Finally, the absurdity of their situation struck them so forcibly that they broke into a simultaneous laugh.

"Ah, ciel de mon âme ! Quel malheur !" exclaimed the lady, shrugging her shoulders in serio-comic despair. "Whatever *are* we to do, Mr. Draycott?"

"Well, you see, we must go on to Norwich now," answered Dick Eliot, without thinking it worth while correcting the conclusion Miss Brooke had jumped to as regards his name—a not unnatural mistake. "I'm awfully sorry, of course."

"Of course. Elopement wasn't your idea, was it? But tell me—what time are we due in Norwich?"

“In — in — in about half-an-hour, Miss Brooke,” stammered Dick, rather overpowered by the lady’s perfect self-possession, her freedom of address, and the full-orbed scrutiny of her glance. “That’ll be just nine o’clock.”

“And then?”

Dick hesitated. Should he escort this elegant, glib-tongued governess to his Aunt Deborah’s, or should he follow the manly traditions of his forefathers and “put up” at the Regent. A vision of that straightlaced lady, his mother’s maiden sister, rose before him, and he faltered.

Aunt Deborah was a woman who prided herself on her “nice sense of propriety,” maintaining that in these days it “behoved one to be circumspect.” She had, moreover, an awkward habit of “disapproving” of things, and instinctively Dick felt that she would disapprove of Miss Brooke and himself,

jointly and severally, at nine o'clock at night.

“*Eh bien !* And then ?”

“Then I vote—I mean, I think, we'd better go to the Regent—the Regent Hotel, you know, Miss Brooke—and either there, or somewhere, we can hire a trap to drive home with.”

“Famous ! At least, it would be if I could only find that wretched ticket. They'll excuse us, by-the-bye, at Draycott Manor, won't they, when they learn what it is has kept us from coming earlier ? The children, of course, will be gone to bed, dear little things ! But there's Mr. Draycott—what will *he* say ?”

“Oh, he's out,” said Dick, who had not, however, heard where it was that the master of the Manor had actually gone. “Won't be back, very likely, till after we are, and even if ——Hal-lo !”

This exclamation was caused by a movement on the part of his companion, who, in the act of placing her umbrella in the net-rack overhead, let fall from among its folds the veritable railway-ticket they had so fruitlessly sought after at Hethercote.

“*Tiens !* Did you ever?” ejaculated Miss Brooke. “That comes, do you know, of being lazy. If I had only sewn the elastic on the umbrella, as I ought to have done, before leaving home, it wouldn’t be gaping open as it is now, and I shouldn’t have had my ticket swallowed up, and you needn’t have come into the carriage, and neither of us would have been obliged to go on to Norwich to-night in this absurd fashion. It’s all in a chain, like the old woman who wanted to get over the stile, with the pig, and the dog, and the stick, and the fire, and water, and the rest of it—*pas vrai ?*”

Miss Brooke had a dazzlingly rapid mode

of speaking, intermingling her prattle with little personal queries and appeals in a way that was singularly attractive to most people she talked with, especially to most men, and giving one the idea that her conversation was much more *spirituel* than it ever was in reality. Those who attempted to analyse her speech in the cold blood of absence or after-thought were puzzled to find where lay the wit that so charmed them when the words had flowed fresh from her lips, and many a man had been sorely disconcerted when, striving to repeat to expectant friends some recent sally of Lydia Brooke's, he discovered how tame it came forth in the quotation.

"The young woman with the influential eyes," was the phrase by which a critical acquaintance had once characterised Miss Brooke; and certainly it was her eyes that were her speciality—her centres of attraction, so to

speak. Large, dark, and lustrous, they caught one's attention immediately, and having caught it, monopolised it. But for them, their owner might have been a pretty enough person, but assuredly not the exceptionally good-looking woman she was. A certain autumnal ripeness of form and warmth of colour had come to her with the development of her third decade; a fulness of limb, a shapely breadth of bosom, a rich, afternoon sort of glow in lip and cheek, an aggregate harmony that set the imaginative few thinking of October woods, with all their sun-dyed bravery and sensuous flush of foliage.

Contemplating the manifold good gifts of his handsome *vis-à-vis*, Dick Eliot even forgot his trouble concerning his mare Atalanta, which he had left waiting outside Hethercote Station in charge of one who, although well aware of its ownership, would probably keep it standing a long time ere his homely wits

would suggest to him the expediency of driving it back to The Leas.

As for Miss Brooke, she was in nowise discomposed by her situation. A woman of eight-and-twenty, our hero (a dozen years younger) was but a child in her sight—rather a nice-looking boy than otherwise, and one to whom it were well to make herself agreeable, he being (so she had decided) son and heir to her future employer, the widowed master of Draycott Manor. Not that it was any effort for Miss Brooke to prove attractive. Belonging to that class of persons who, “being natural, naturally please,” she gained, like He of Cawdor, golden opinions from all sorts of people—opinions as unwarranted by any intrinsic moral merit as those acquired by the Scottish Thane. For Lydia Brooke had as little of inward and spiritual grace as can well be imagined. Without being at all actively or openly unrighteous, she was nevertheless

as passively irreligious, as indifferent to virtue in the abstract, as a new-born babe. Like a babe, too, she had no real development of conscience, and her conduct was largely influenced by that intelligent spirit of self-gratification which is one the clearly defined characteristic distinguishing the human bantling from the offspring of the brute-beast. With a greater intellectual endowment, such a woman would probably have obtained a widespread influence and notoriety, an evil pre-eminence among her fellow-creatures; but, with only average mental capacities, and an easy, epicurean temperament, she was accepted by society at her presumptive worth—namely, as a governess for society's children. Her qualifications for this position (besides those natural ones already indicated) were based on a prolonged residence abroad, and the pregnant fact of her family connection with a deceased archdeacon.



CHAPTER IV.

AFTER TEA.

WHOSO has visited Norwich will haply remember that its chief station (that of Thorpe) lies not exactly out of humanity's reach, but sufficiently far from the centre of the city to make the missing of trains a thing of fatal facility for its worthy inhabitants, and eke for the stranger within its gates. This station is place, indeed, on the further side of the river Yare, whose sluggish tide thereafter laps the wooden piles and dingy warehouse walls of the old East-Anglian capital, creeping torpidly between black and squalid

buildings, rotten and rat-riddled, the empty window-frames of which look blankly down on the dark waters, like the eyeless sockets of blind, uncleanly beggars.

Notwithstanding, however, the distance of the railway station from the Regent Hotel, Miss Brooke decided on walking in preference to taking a cab, owning, with a frankness more than feminine, that she wanted to stretch her legs. Dick readily admitted the validity of this motive, but the straightforward English in which it was expressed confirmed him in his policy of avoiding a collision with Aunt Deborah. That estimable woman would assuredly "blush for" one who could so far forget "what was due to decorum" as to speak with such an entire absence of ladylike equivocation.

It was a Saturday night that found our two friends in Norwich, and a Norwich Saturday (market-day) fills the city to overflowing,

skimming the whole county of its cream. Then comes the Norfolk farmer, to buy, to sell, or "do a deal." Then come the Norfolk farmer's wife and daughters, in *toilettes* of strange, barbaric splendour; for Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed as one of these. Bulky men, "who put their trust in bullocks and in beeves," produce endless "blocks" in the pedestrian traffic by gathering together in mid-pavement, exchanging samples of corn from the depths of dingy bags, and stolidly ignoring the fretful efforts of the much-vexed citizen to cleave his way through their obtuse assemblies. Outlandish accents fill the air: provincialism is rampant; an agricultural carnival usurps the city.

Wending their way through the busy bright-lit streets, Miss Brooke and our hero attracted more than one critical glance as they passed by, and many were the alien eyes that expressed approval of Dick's companion.

Of this Dick soon became aware, although the lady herself betrayed no consciousness of being an object of any special regard. With a boy's arrogance and unwisdom, the young gentleman evinced, by lowering brow and haughty lip, his imperial displeasure at the presumption of the public, not knowing that a pretty face is as little to be made a monopoly of as the sunlight itself--that a thing of beauty (especially of female beauty) is a joy for everybody. Perhaps Miss Brooke may have noticed something of this artless display of resentment, and have been amused at the exhibition. At all events, it was with a smile that she met our hero's aspiring glance whenever he lifted his eyes to hers.

Arrived at the Regent, and ensconced in a corner of the coffee-room, Miss Brooks proceeded to refresh herself with a cup of tea, which Dick, at the lady's express invitation, had the gratification of sharing. True,

he scalded his throat with the first sip of the fragrant Chinese brew, that seemed, for the nonce, equally to inebriate as to cheer ; but this was an accident scarce worthy of remark, and altogether too trivial to mitigate the novel charm of the situation. Miss Brooke, fagged by more than a hundred monotonous miles of jolting and jerking along the Great Eastern line, was both hungry and thirsty, and sat down to her simple meal with unaffected relish. For her it was merely a question of physical sustenance ; for our hero it was an affair of genuine emotional moment. Thus, whilst the too susceptible Werther struggled with his feelings, the more philosophic Charlotte,

“ Like a well-conducted person,
Went on cutting bread-and-butter.”

“ And now,” said Miss Brooke, when the little *tête-à-tête* repast was fairly ended, “ about getting to Draycott Manor ? ”

Dick aroused himself with a sigh. He fain would have prolonged this tea party *à deux* for an indefinite period. As the old Norsemen dreamt of a celestial alehouse, wherein the cup and merry jest went round for all eternity, so visions of a like materialistic elysium—a sort of temperance Valhalla—were rife within his brain, and before him rose the possibility of some blissful antithesis to that unfortunate “party in a parlour,” described in *Peter Bell* :

“Crammed just as they on earth were crammed,
Some sipping milk, some sipping tea,
But, as you by their faces see,
All silent—and all damn’d !”

Miss Brooke’s query, however, recalled him from these ill-regulated speculations on a future existence, bringing him face to face with mundane matters - of - fact. Valhalla visions, and his idle, hypothetical fancy anent “that damn’d party in a parlour” (as poor Lamb once quoted it), were reluctantly let

go, and he prepared to apply himself to the exigencies of the moment.

“About getting to the Manor, Miss Brooke? Yes, I’ll be off after a trap directly—I’ll go at once. Only,” continued Dick, in a hesitating tone, “if you wouldn’t mind being left alone a little while—just for ten minutes or so, Miss Brooke—I think I could find a better turn-out at the livery stables across the market than I could here. They know me there; the governor does business with them, in fact; and so, you see——”

“Yes, yes, I see. Go by all means, and I’ll wait here until you return. I’m not at all nervous, thank you—not in the least. Besides, you won’t be too long away, will you?”

Dick earnestly assured Miss Brooke that he would be back in a jif—in next to no time; and, having received a gracious nod of adieu, he hastened forth on his errand. Just as he emerged from the hotel, two gentlemen

entered it, the elder of whom he must inevitably have recognised had he only noticed him in passing, for it was none other than his mother's respected cousin, his own godfather, Sydney Draycott. The person with him was one of the many great musical authorities of the musical city of Norwich, and the pair were engrossed in a lively criticism on the concert they had that moment returned from hearing. Arm-in-arm they passed into the house, finally establishing themselves in the little private parlour at the rear of the bar, whence orders were shortly issued for sherry-and-seltzer at once, and for Mr. Draycott's carriage in the course of half-an-hour.

Meanwhile, Miss Brooke was left to follow her maiden meditations in undisturbed solitude. These were not particularly active or intent. At no time greatly given to taking thought for the morrow, she was now too tired by travel to speculate with any degree

of earnestness on the future that awaited her, and contented herself with the conclusion that she had secured at least *one* partisan in the household of her new employer—the young gentleman, to wit, with whom she had just been taking tea. Still building on her erroneous impression of Dick's identity, she breathed an inward hope that Draycott *père* might prove as facile and susceptible a subject as was evidently Draycott *fils*; and the train of ideas thus evoked carried her pleasantly off into cloudland.

Ten minutes passed — fifteen — twenty. Miss Brooke began to grow impatient (“Tiresome boy! Why in the world doesn't he come back?”) Time still dragged slowly on, and still no signs of our hero's approach were apparent. At length, ringing the bell, Miss Brooke was answered by the suave headwaiter in person.

“Do you know if Mr. Draycott has yet come in?”

“Mr. Draycott, 'm ?” said the worthy, with that “damnable iteration” which marks the utterance of those attendant evils of society, waiters. “Yes, 'm, Mr. Draycott come in jest a little while ago, 'm.”

“Indeed ! Where is he now, then ?”

“He's in the bar-parlour, 'm—leastways, he were there not a minute since, 'm.”

“Be so good, then, as to tell him I'm waiting, and shall be glad to see him as soon as possible.”

“Cert'n'y, 'm—I'll tell him directly. Any name, 'm ?”

“Oh, that's not necessary ; he'll know at once who it is wants him.”

“Jest so, 'm,” said the official, blandly. “I'll tell him myself.” And, whilst Miss Brooke remained in the coffee-room, somewhat annoyed that our hero should have thus prolonged his absence, the white-chokered messenger made his way to the bar-parlour,

where Sydney Draycott, Esq., "with watery eye and educated whisker," was carefully wrapping himself up preparatory to starting home.

"Lady waitin' to see you in the coffee-room, sir."

"Eh! what? See *me*?"

"Yes, sir. Arst for Mr. Draycott. Wish to see you as soon as possible, sir."

"Dear, dear! Very singular—very so! Do you know who—er—who she is, William?"

"Well, no, sir; can't say as I do know her pusson'ly. Seem to be a stranger to these parts, sir. Didn't give any name; said as you'd know at once who it were, sir."

"Yes, but I *don't*!" exclaimed Mr. Draycott, in an aggrieved tone. "Haven't the slightest idea, not the—er—the—what is she like, William?"

"'Pear to be quite the lady, sir—quite so."

"Tut, tut!" muttered Mr. Draycott, glancing at himself in the glass, and softly

fondling his whisker. "Well—er—I'll be there directly, William—be there directly."

Left, on the retirement of the waiter, once more sole occupant of the coffee-room, Miss Brooke drew on her jacket and gloves, and, turning to the mirror, began adjusting her hat on the massy coils of bright black hair so artistically braided about her head. Ere she had finished to her satisfaction, however, the door softly opened, and her solitude was invaded. By the reflection in the glass she could see that it was not our hero, but a stranger who had entered—a middle-aged man, wrapped in a light grey overcoat, and wearing a pair of close-fitting, delicately hued gloves on his well-shaped hands. Thinking it only polite to acknowledge his presence, Miss Brooke made a half-turn in his direction, and was rewarded by an elaborate bow, an ingratiating simper, on the part of the new-comer. Somewhat astonished, the lady

addressed herself anew to the mirror, in whose tell-tale depths the stranger's every movement was distinctly observable.

(" *Dieu me bénisse !* what in the world is the matter with the man ?" said Miss Brooke to herself, as she saw the figure in the glass fidgeting nervously in her rear, with eyes fixed expectantly on her person. " Perhaps, by-the-bye, he, too, wants to arrange his toilette.")

" *Ahem !*" coughed the stranger, with a peculiar and significant emphasis.

Miss Brooke turned, abruptly.

" A thousand pardons, madam ! but—er—are you the lady who was inquiring for Mr. Draycott ?"

" For Mr. Draycott ? Yes. I expect him back again every minute."

" Expect him back again, madam ? That's very odd, very—er—very singular !"

" *Vous trouvez ?*" said Miss Brooke, with a

cool shrug of the shoulder. "I can't see that it's at all odd—at all singular; and, excuse me, but I really don't understand——"

"One moment, my dear madam — one moment! *I* am Mr. Draycott."

"*You?*" repeated Miss Brooke, for the instant taken aback. "Oh, well, there's some mistake, evidently. You're not *my* Mr. Draycott, at all events. *My* Mr. Draycott is quite a young gentleman—a son of Mr. Sydney Draycott, of Draycott Man——"

"Eh! *What?* Son of—— Impossible, madam!"

"Sir!"

"Impossible, madam! Why, bless my soul the—er—the boy's a mere child—an infant, madam! *Tom?* He can't be more than—let's see—than—er—than eight or nine years at the most."

"*Mais si, mais si, m'sieu!*" said the governess, the spirit of contradiction rising

within her, and becoming, as was her wont, more foreign in her phraseology as she warmed with discussion, "if he has not already seen seventeen, he is certainly very close to it."

"Really, madam, you must excuse my disagreeing with you. I—er—I *ought* to know. I am his father."

"*You* his father?" faltered Miss Brooke.
"Then you're——"

"Sydney Draycott, madam, of Draycott Manor, at—er—at your service."

And Mr. Draycott, who had lived much in Paris, and who prided himself on the nicety of his conduct toward what he was wont to term "the sex," favoured the lady with a second elaborate obeisance.

For once at least in her life Miss Brooke was thoroughly disconcerted. A glimmering of the true state of affairs flashed upon her, and the blood rushed hotly to her face,

as she reflected in what a ridiculously false position she found herself. There was obviously, however, but one course to be taken, the first step of which was boldly to declare her identity. Without, therefore, pausing to puzzle farther as to the precise relation our hero actually bore to Mr. Draycott, she proceeded to introduce herself forthwith.

“Mr. Draycott,” began she, fixing him with her magnificent eyes, “I’m afraid there’s been a very stupid mistake made on my part—a mistake that demands both an explanation and an apology.”

“By no means, my dear madam—by no means,” answered the gentleman, affably, hurrying blindly onward to the social pitfall that lay in his path. “Any circumstance that permits me the—er—honour of your society is, I venture to say, none other than a happy accident—a happy accident.”

“Mr. Draycott,” said his companion, plung-

ing resolutely *in medias res*, "I am Miss Brooke."

But Sydney Draycott was a man whose thoughts were so entirely, so invariably, engrossed by one subject, and that one subject himself, that such a slight and irrelative matter as the name of his children's new governess had found no abiding place in his memory. What response he would have made to Miss Brooke's declaration it is impossible to say, for at that moment the door opened, and in walked Dick Eliot.

Of the scene that ensued, of the questions that were asked and answered, of the explanations that were given and received, ere a clear and perfect understanding was established between the three persons, it is needless to inflict an account on the intelligent reader. That a general agreement was eventually arrived at may be premised. Dick's delayed appearance was due to the

inability of the livery stables to meet his wants in a sufficiently satisfactory manner—wants which were now obviated by the presence of Mr. Draycott and his carriage at the Regent Hotel.

In comparative silence our trio made the journey home, for the still-prevailing uproar of the wind precluded anything like sustained conversation. Each was occupied by private reflections. Sydney Draycott meditated on his own manifold excellencies and accomplishments—(Charles Eliot once quoted him as a man so rich in self-appreciation that he enjoyed the monopoly of it)—with an occasional condescending bye-thought for the lady at his side. Miss Brooke mused drowsily on the day's adventures, inwardly bemoaning the absence of her "luggage and things," only one small box being retained in her possession, whilst the rest lay at Norwich under orders for transmission to

Hethercote. As for our hero, seated opposite his two seniors in the dark carriage, he chewed the cud of sweet and bitter fancy with a silent and simple abandonment truly calf-like ; and, when he took his leave at the head of the little bye-road leading to The Leas, it was with an air of abstraction beyond his years.





CHAPTER V.

DICK'S NEW IDOL.

THERE was a certain lady, esteemed and eulogised by Congreve, of whom Steele magnificently said "to have loved her was a liberal education." This is as it may be (Moore has told us what they learn whose only books are woman's looks), but it is a fact that ere our hero, Dick Elist, had loved Miss Lydia Brooke a bare three months, his education (hitherto rather backward) had made a marked progress. And when we speak of his *education*, we use the word in its widest and most catholic sense. The incipient MAN, the human being,

the creature of ideas and passions, had mentally and physically advanced, ripened, developed. Not all the conventional instruction he had undergone aforesaid so opened his mind, so expanded his spirit, as did his casual intercourse with Miss Brooke. That young Juan learnt more from Donna Julia than ever he acquired from his lady-mother, Donna Inez, and the like proper "authorities," is a presumption no person of experience would call into question.

And, after all, it was not actually Lydia Brooke that our hero fell in love with, but rather with his conception of Lydia Brooke—a decidedly different personage; no mere daughter of Eve, but a flawless divinity evolved from the glowing depths of his inner consciousness. At Dick's age one idealises everything, and the warm, rose-coloured hues of fancy glorify much that is otherwise inglorious. There is a period in youth when

one awakes as if from sleep—the heedless sleep of childhood ; but, during the slumber, our eyelids have been touched with the juice of love-in-idleness, and, lo ! the first creature our filmy gaze falls upon, straightway captivates our heart. Failing other object, we even turn our young affections on ourselves, becoming, Narcissus-like, the victims of a misplaced attachment. This, however, is the error of lads rather than of lasses. The softer sex is befooled less selfishly, though not less egregiously, throwing away its youth and beauty on things all ugly and unworthy, as Titania with Nick Bottom, or the chaste Diana with the archgoat Pan. What matter ass's head or cloven hoof ? If rogues and simpletons cease to find favour with women, it would be but a smileless world for mankind at large.

Dick Eliot, then, endowed his godfather's governess with all the graces and all the

virtues, and thereon became enamoured of the perfection he had himself conceived. The story of the Cyprian sculptor, bewitched by an image of his own creation, is one of deep significance, of every-day illustration ; and surely no Pygmalion was ever more infatuated than our unsophisticated hero. That he never told his love is a matter of course—(ingenuous youth forbid !)—but, equally as a matter of course, its existence was apparent to the object of adoration from the very outset. The lady, however, had all the advantages of age, sex, and experience ; and hence, that which was a serious malady for the boy was but a passing amusement for the woman.

Three months had elapsed since Miss Brooke's introduction to our hero, and it was now mid-winter. Christmas had come and gone ; the old year was dead and buried in snow, and the icy breath of its successor was

borne bleakly over the white silences of the fields, and through the bare, leaf-lorn woods and skeleton hedges. From the neighbouring ocean, with its hungry hollows and gaunt monotony of wrestling waters, a melancholy sound swept landward—a sound whose deep-mouthed passion and pathos might seem to speak the woes of some unsceptred Saturn, the wrath and heart-break of a god!

It was the breakfast hour at The Leas. Mr. and Mrs. Eliot were seated at the table; Dick was kneeling on the hearthrug, warming a boot at the fire before putting it on; and these were the words his father spake:

“Darwin said in his haste that all men were monkeys; and, 'pon my soul, Mrs. Eliot! the irrational, widespread habit of mimicry abroad in society gives a colour to the theory of our ape-origin that by no means encourages ancestral pride. Now, why I should do a thing merely because my

neighbour does it, is more than I can understand. *He* likes county dinners, perhaps; *he*——”

“My dear, he’s not going.”

“Who’s not going?”

“Cousin Sydney is not.”

“And pray, madam, did I speak of cousin Sydney?”

“You spoke of your neighbour, Charles, and you know perfectly well we have none other near us—none, that is to say, whom we recognise.”

“Really, Alicia, you’re the most provokingly literal-minded woman I think I’ve ever met! When you are told to love your neighbour as yourself, do you suppose it limits your affections to persons living next door, or to people within easy visiting distance? I was referring to the world in general.”

The world in general, however, was too big

a subject to come within the contracted sphere of Mrs. Eliot's consideration, which rarely troubled itself about anything beyond its immediate surroundings. Geographically speaking, her sympathies were bounded on the north by the Wyatts, of Beechley, on the south by the Gurneys and Pitts, of Brookham, on the east by the Ariels, of Waste Court, and on the west by the Dales, of Little Upton. As her husband not unreasonably complained, she *was* a literal-minded woman—a handsome, healthy, unpoetic, perfectly well-bred British matron, doing her duty as wife and mother with all dignity and decorum, and in every way conducting herself as an edifying member of (county) society. As Alicia Darby she had been the acknowledged belle of the district, and young Charley Eliot, smitten by her fine face and figure, had impulsively placed at her feet his heart and fortune, both of which, with her

parents' approval, she had accepted. The naturally sweet temper of the man, and the aristocratic equanimity of the woman, made their married life far smoother than might have been expected from the union of such diverse natures. An occasional impatient tug and twisting of the moustache at his wife's dead level of conventionality, and her utter absence of sympathy for anything out of the beaten track of ideas, was the only sign that ever escaped Charles Eliot, although the tinge of sarcasm colouring his conversation was doubtless an unconscious protest against the intellectual narrowness of the fair fellow-creature he had vowed to love, honour, and cherish.

"I suppose I must go," resumed Mr. Eliot, after a pause, "although I did make a resolution to keep clear of those Hall dinners for the future."

"There are certain duties which we owe to

society, Charles, as I believe I have more than once remarked."

"I believe so too, Alicia," answered the gentleman, suppressing a yawn; "in fact, I distinctly remember your saying the same thing before. But what do you think of my idea of bringing in a bill for taking the duties off society? It's a notion I've had by me a long while, and I fully intend suggesting it to this man, Dale, we are to meet to-night. If he's to be our new county member, as I'm told, it'll interest him."

"I do hope, Charles, you will do your utmost to make a favourable impression on Mr. Dale, and not say anything so glaringly unworthy of your position. I greatly wish that his first visit among us may be an agreeable one."

"Well, I wish it may, my dear; but I confess I have my misgivings. You see," continued Mr. Eliot, with a charming show of

candour, "take us all in all, we are *not* an agreeable lot; and I fear that this young Dale, who's seen so much of foreign life, will find us just a trifle heavy on hand. We are decent enough folk in our way, no doubt; but then, what a way we have! Poor young fellow! I'm really and sincerely sorry for him."

Mrs. Eliot expressed an opinion that her husband's sorrow was most uncalled-for, most unwarranted. Mr. Oscar Dale might have mingled in Continental society; indeed, she had been given to understand that this was the case; but she had yet to learn that England, that an English county, was deficient in any of those higher social virtues and refinements which distinguish the better classes. They might not be able to entertain Mr. Dale with the light-minded converse of a Parisian *salon*, or to introduce him to the somewhat mixed assembly to be met with at

Rome and Florence ; but, on the other hand——

On the other hand, Mrs. Eliot was calmly confident that, for perfection of grace and culture, for general excellence, moral and intellectual, “a little lower than the angels,” the society of her native county was a thing apart. This declaration of faith was listened to by Mr. Eliot with a patience quite pathetic in its dumbness ; but, when it was fairly finished, he lost no time in escaping the subject.

“Not a flake of snow to-day, Dick,” said he, furtively loading his latest pet meer-schaum, as he turned toward the window. “I think you may promise yourself a fair time of it at the Hall, if only the ice has been kept decently swept. You start almost directly, I suppose ? How do you intend getting there, by-the-bye ?”

“King Cole, in the sledge,” answered Dick,

still attending to his boots, "with Atalanta just put on as a leader."

"Oh! indeed; that'll look something like tandem, won't it?"

"Why, my dear Charles, it *will* be tandem," interposed Mrs. Eliot. "And what you want, Dick, to drive in such state for I really cannot conceive!"

"Promised to call at the Manor," explained Dick shortly.

"At the Manor! Is cousin Sydney going after all, then?"

"No; Dora and Tom."

"Oh, that's the arrangement, is it? Well, I must say, Dick, you are most kind, most attentive, to those children nowadays. And you used not to care for them one bit, I remember. I'm sure both they and their papa ought to be exceedingly obliged to you. Only take care how you drive, there's a good boy."

“All right, I’ll be careful.” And with a somewhat heightened colour (the effect, possibly, of pulling on his boots), Dick gathered up skates, gimlet, and flask, and disappeared.

“Dear child ! he has an excellent heart,” murmured Mrs. Eliot, as the door closed on her son. “Don’t you think so yourself, Charles ?”

“Well,——I scarcely know.”

“Scarcely know ? my *dear* !”

“I mean, I fancy he may have lost it.”

“Really, Charles, how very absurd !”

“Very. Just my own view of the matter. Boys *will* be boys, however.”

“You surely are not in earnest ?”

Still tending his pipe at the window, Mr. Eliot saw the sledge and its driver pass down the carriage-way to the high road beyond. The lad’s face, as he waved his whip in adieu to his father, was bright and eager-eyed ; and

the rhythmical tumult of the sledge-bells lingered in the clear morning air like the sound of song and laughter. Some fleeting memory of his own glad youth may have floated up from that twilight land of ghosts and echoes which we call the Past, for it was with a sigh that Mr. Eliot turned to answer his wife's reiterated query :

"You surely are not in earnest, Charles?"

"No, my dear ; on second thoughts I don't think I am. Our lad is but a lad, after all. I dare say he has dreams and fancies that neither you nor I can quite fathom, and we mustn't be unwisely wise. At what time will you be ready to start for the Hall—six, seven ? When?"

Whether Mrs. Eliot would have suffered the matter to slip by thus elusively, without further explanation, is doubtful ; but at this moment her attention was called away by

the arrival of the morning mail (per Hethercote postman), in discussing which her maternal spirit of inquiry was, for the time, set aside.





CHAPTER VI.

AT THE HALL.

WHEN the Dales of Little Upton confirmed the rumour that their connection, Oscar Dale, the inheritor of his uncle's estate of Idlewild, was actually coming from abroad to settle in the county, a good deal of local interest and excitement was evinced, and his relations rose perceptibly in the social scale. A large landed proprietor, young, wealthy ("and, I'm told, good - looking, my dear," whispered one spinster to another, "and has been rather wild, papa says"), it is not astonishing that the prospect of such an acquisition to the

neighbourhood should have been regarded with emotion. The breast feminine was animated with a delightful glow of expectation, and more than one enterprising virgin, who haply had passed her *première jeunesse*, was fain to be renewing her youth like the eagle at the bare tidings of the prodigal's return.

Nor was the agitation simply social. The Norfolk and Norwich Conservative Club called a meeting of its members, at which it was solemnly debated whether Oscar Dale, Esq., would not be a fit and proper person to represent the county in the Commons House of Parliament, and whether he should not be formally invited to appear as a candidate at the forthcoming election. With this end in view was organised that assembly at the seat of the Muffle Drummonds, of which mention has been made in our preceding chapter. A grand dinner was to be given

by old Sir Hugo, the retiring M.P., and the more influential of the Conservative gentry were bidden to the feast to meet the man proposed as their future representative.

That these deep-laid political plottings might be rendered less palpable to the prying eyes of the opposing faction, a semblance of a mere social or convivial character was lent to the gathering by including in the invitations the wives and daughters of the gentlemen partisans aforesaid, and furthermore, by preluding the banquet itself with a skating party of young men and maidens on the lake that fronted the Hall.

“Artful, artful, my lady—ve-ry artful!” chuckled old Sir Hugo, with a feeble relish of the strategy. “And—and historical. So, in like way, you know, might the Romans—the, the, the ancient Romans—have disguised their plans at the festival given to the—the

—yes, yes !—to the Sabines—the—the rape of the Sab——”

“ Sir Hugo !”

“ My love ?”

“ The girls !”

“ Yes, my love.”

And the old man meekly subsided into silence, pulled up as he was pulled up a dozen times a day, on the verge of committing himself by the recital of some chance phrase or anecdote calculated (according to his wife's ideas of propriety) to contaminate the maiden minds of those somewhat elderly young ladies, his daughters.

Of course, our hero was of the skating party, and, in his position as only son, he had farther been honoured with an invitation to the subsequent dinner, whereat his parents were also engaged to appear. The latter distinction he would willingly have dispensed with, but Mrs. Eliot would not suffer him to

decline the greatness that had been thrust upon him.

Apart from the embarrassment of wearing a costume void of available pockets—those harbours of refuge for the hands of hobble-dehoyhood—there was the painful difficulty of finding food for conversation with the lady allotted him at table.

“I hope Richard has made himself agreeable to you, Miss Smiley, during dinner,” was (as Dick well knew) the inevitable remark of his inconsiderate mother to his fair neighbour at the first lull in talk at the latter end of the meal; whereupon all eyes would be turned in the direction of the conscious, tongue-tied Richard, and all ears would await the answer of the lady thus addressed.

Of these impending trials, however, Dick thought little as he drove toward Draycott Manor. His head was full of other thoughts, and his vision travelled idly over the winter

landscape, spread out, wan and wide, for miles before him. A pale, pearl-grey, empty sky above ; a world of white, strangely soft and dumb, stretching around as far as eye could reach ; a clear, crisp atmosphere ; and, despite the cold, a certain sense of calm and comfort throughout the silent, snow-muffled land.

Now and then a rabbit, hopping lightly over the brittle twigs and curled up corpses of last year's leaves, would steal forth from the ghostly woodlands, and make its way across the mute waste of the wintry fields ; or a blackbird, flitting from out the low-lying coppice, would bring down a handful of loose snow with the flutter of its wings. A dream-world of deadened sounds and softened outlines had come in place of the many-voiced, many-coloured earth of heretofore, and a peaceful vagueness and purity lulled the white slumber season of the young year.

It was about eleven o'clock when Dick Eliot came in view of the Manor, and his young friends, Dora and Tom Draycott, were already awaiting him at the head of the avenue. A third person was also standing there in the snow, a person whose bright Shetland shawl and liberal display of warm-hued petticoat made quite a vivid patch of colour on the white background. Perhaps the artistic soul within him caught fire at the sight, but anyhow there came a fine responsive glow into our hero's cheek on beholding this scarlet-skirted figure at the gateway—a glow that deepened to a positive blush as he stopped the sledge and lifted his hat in salutation.

“Hooray! we're going to 'go tandem,” sang out young Tom to his sister. “I say Dolly! you and Miss Brooke 'll sit behind, you know, and I'll ride in front with Dick.”

“That you won't, so there now!” cried

Dora promptly. "I shall ride in front with Dick myself."

"I think it would be much better and safer if you both went behind," said Miss Brooke, calmly. "What do *you* think, Mr. Eliot?"

"Certainly—by all means—I think so too," answered Dick; and the children were fain to be content with the position in the rear, whilst Miss Brooke coolly went to the fore, occupying the place of honour beside the driver.

A light singing of the whip as it cut through the thin frosty air, a sudden scrambling of hoofs, a scattering of snow, and the sledge was scudding swiftly forward between the white fences and fields that skirted the road to Hethercote Hall. A very gay and gallant show they made in the eyes of cottage children, as they sped by with their jingling bells and passing flash of colour; and more than one hungry ploughboy, swing-

ing his hob-nailed heels from the top bar of gate or stile, paused, with a slice of frost-bitten turnip bulging from his mouth, to gaze after the "gentlefolk i' the sley."

The distance from the Manor to the Hall was but short—*too* short, Dick decided—and they were soon gliding through the snowy park toward the big stone-grey house itself, the clear, keen, ringing music of skates on the ice, and the joyous voices of the skaters, reaching them some while ere they actually came within sight of the lake. In the shelter of the great central porch, over which were emblazoned in stone the arms of the Muffle Drummonds—a hound *dormant*, with the old Norman motto, *Gare au Chien !* ("Beware of the dog!") in scroll beneath—Dick saw assembled a small group, consisting of Sir Hugo, his wife, a couple of daughters, a minor canon from Norwich, and one or two ladies and gentlemen unknown.

“Ay, ay! who’s this, who’s this?” babbled old Sir Hugo, blinking at the approaching sledge-party. “Whom have we here, my lady, whom have we here?”

Lady Drummond’s gold-rimmed eye-glasses were slowly raised and set a-straddle across her high-ridged Roman nose, the better to scrutinise the new arrivals.

“Young Eliot and two of the —— ye-es, two of the Draycott children. The person with them is, I imagine, the governess.”

“Nice children, nice children,” quoth the loose-tongued old baronet, raising a pinch of snuff to his nostrils, with trembling fingers; “and, and a fine young woman, egad! The governess, eh? Well, well, well!

“‘Delightful task! to rear the tender thought,
To teach the—the—the young idea how to shoot.’

Teach ’em how to skate to day, eh, Boddy-man?”

And, with a thin, ghost-like chuckle work-

ing and rattling in his scrannel windpipe, and puckering up his wizened features, Sir Hugo turned to the Rector of Heathercote, whose portly person had just emerged from the house.

Greetings being exchanged between our hero's party and his host's, and the sledge and horses being sent off to the stables, the whole company made a move toward the lake, where some score or so skaters were darting to and fro, and wheeling round each other with that pre-occupied persistence of motion, in which midges are wont to spend their May evenings.

Dick Eliot lost little time in joining the throng, and Miss Brooke (for whom were destined the second pair of skates brought from The Leas) was induced, after some slight hesitation, to follow suit.

In reality, the lady was a fearless and skilful skater, having had considerable practice

on foreign waters, and being a perfect mistress of the bold curves, sweeping circles, and free-footed enterprise of the "outside edge." In character of instructress to her young pupils she was enabled to take to the ice without violating the fitness of things in the aristocratic eyes of Lady Muffle Drummond, who held that persons in Miss Brooke's position should always be made to know and maintain their "place"—that they should consider themselves, and be considered, as mere dwellers on the threshold, and by no means admissible to the select *arcana*, the holy of holies, wherein their betters live, and move, and have their being.

"Hi! here! I say you, Eliot!" shouted a black-browed, bull-necked young fellow, following in the wake of our hero. "Want to speak to you a moment. How are ye? All right—hey? Who's that woman over yonder—dark woman—the one that's just put off

her shawl there ? Who is she, hey ? Reg'lar teaser, and no mistake !”

The speaker, who had the air and address of an under-keeper, with a suggestion of the stables, was Ulric Muffle Drummond, second son of Sir Hugo, and erewhile a schoolmate of Dick Eliot.

A thick-set, heavy-jowled, animal-looking young man, with a dull red complexion, cloudy, unresponsive eyes, and a suggestion of brute force, of brute passion, in the coarse mouth and square-cut chin. A young man with a fist that could fell an ox, and with a general appearance that made one fancy knocking down bullocks, and such like butchery, to be his most fitting vocation. A Briton of the Ancient Order of Britons, insular and uncultured, terrible in his wrath, with a courage, obstinacy, and endurance absolutely unquenchable ; a being in whose society the intelligent foreigner instinctively

feels ill at ease, regarding him with nervous dislike and distrust, even as he regards the surly-souled bull-dog, that shows its formidable teeth, and stiffens its sinews in sniffing at his Continental calves.

“Morning, Drummond,” said Dick with a nod. “What is it? *Who* do you want to know about?”

“Topper over yonder,” answered the young gentleman, sententiously. “Dark woman, red petticoat, gipsy-looking, and that sort of thing.”

“You mean Miss Boddyman, I suppose?” said our hero, without looking round.

“No; I’ll be shot if I do! None o’ your district visitors for me! Not my sort, old cock! I mean the woman that came in your sledge. *Now* you know. Who is she, hey?”

Dick turned at this, and the two young men faced each other.

"That came in my sledge?"

"Aye ; that came in your sledge."

A pause. Dick makes a cut with his stick at a fragment of frozen snow. His companion gazes steadily away to where Miss Brooke is wheeling and hovering, hawk-wise, about her pupils. The hesitation on our hero's part is only momentary, but both he and his interlocutor are curiously alive to it.

"Oh—ah ! That's Miss Whats-her-name," answers Dick, somewhat abruptly. "The—a—the governess."

"Whose governess, hey ? Yours?"

"No ; the Draycotts'."

"Thankee. Think I'll go and speak to 'em. Do the honours, and that sort o' thing. See you again, old cock, by-and-by."

And with this, the speaker struck off toward the head of the lake, leaving his guest to follow or not, as he might feel inclined.

“What a cad that fellow is!” muttered Dick to himself, in a tone of strong conviction. “I always did dislike him at school, and, by Jove! he don’t seem to have improved much since. Bowing and scraping there! He’ll be down directly; and serve the beggar deuced well right, too!”





CHAPTER VII.

“A PRETTY PIECE OF BUSINESS.”

IN this queer comedy of errors which we call life—and which has the Devil for prompter and Death as scene-shifter—one of the queerest episodes is surely that wherein Young Love pours forth its treasure—pure, honest, ardent, all-confiding, all-believing affection—at the feet of an utterly unworthy and unappreciative idol! The heathen, in his blindness, says the Rev. Bishop Heber, bows down to wood and stone; and people who have travelled assure us that such is indeed the case. This, of course, is very deplorable; but when we see

the enlightened Christian going through a similar short-sighted ceremony, what, as fellow-Christians, must be our feelings ?

In Lydia Brooke, as we have already intimated, Dick Eliot beheld a divinity. Scoff not, ye breakers of images, at the poor child's infatuation, but rather recall the time when such ignorance was bliss, such credulity an intoxicating delight ! Faith is always beautiful—with a beauty independent of its object—and if your days of delusion, reader, are gone by, and you wander amid empty years, seeing drearily through the grass and the flowers the skeletons that whiten in the earth beneath, you needs must own that you have lost more than you have gained. Better, surely, to look upon the world as a garden than as a burial-ground. Better youth's blindfold worship—aye, youth's animalism, even ! than the pulseless materialism of manhood.

Our hero was a poet. As yet, indeed, undeveloped, and with but feeble stirrings of the God-gift within him ; but, nevertheless, a poet. The pathetic splendours of setting suns, the tender witchery of moonrise, the shifting glory of sea and sky, and all the illimitable loveliness of mountain and meadow and woodland—these for him were not merely as they are for the mass, things dumb and soul-less. He kept them in his heart, as Mary kept the sayings of the child Jesus, treasuring them up for the future to interpret. Tennyson tells how the music of the spheres sleeps in the plain brown eggs of the nightingale : and so poetry (living, though undelivered,) slumbered within the quickening brain of our hero.

The winter morning was sharpening into the winter afternoon, when the skating party at the Hall began to break up. The last cold gleam of sunlight had faded from the

stone-fronted mansion of the Muffle Drummonds, leaving it with a stern set grey face, as of something suddenly caught and chilled in death. Ghostlier grew the snowy park, the leafless woods, the leaden sky. A few enthusiasts lingered yet on the lake, flitting, bat-like, over its pallid surface, or circling beneath the shadow-breeding pines that skirted its farther shore. Of these were Dick Eliot and Miss Brooke. Young Drummond was also among the half-dozen or so remaining skaters, but our hero had contrived to baffle his attendance on the governess, by luring her away with a promise of virgin ice.

By threading a certain narrow outlet between the pines, one came to a small, round, reed-bordered pond, whose connection with the main body of water had hitherto been overlooked or ignored by all eyes save those of our inquiring hero. To this retreat he

had tempted Miss Brooke for a final ten minutes' of her favourite exercise ; and seductive, indeed, for the true votary of skating was the clear, black, flawless expanse of ice which it afforded.

Dick's heart thrilled with a strange intensity as he found himself alone in the society of the woman whom his soul revered, the goddess of his dreams and aspirations. Alone ! The spot was as still and solitary as the midday desert. Round it brooded the solemn Norwegian pines, with not a breath of wind to stir their snow-laden branches ; whilst an inner belt of frozen reeds stood stiff and stark beneath the shadow of their over-reaching arms. A spectral twilight possessed the place ; a weird sense of secrecy ; a certain conscious and expectant silence, as though wood and water were dumbly waiting their deliverance from some mysterious spell of old ages.

"Heavens!" exclaimed Miss Brooke, with an involuntary shiver. "What a sepulchre of a place you've brought me to! But, then, what ice!"

And, with an easy mastery of motion, she struck out across the glassy surface, which gave back a hollow, complaining echo to the sharp-bladed steel. Dick followed her movements with all his eyes; a tender tumult in his breast: a chaotic vision of sweet possibilities bewildering his brain. Both the lady and the gentleman were, for the time, wholly pre-occupied; the former with a purely physical and selfish enjoyment of her own skill, the latter with thoughts far-flying into the fairy regions of the ideal. Long, long after, when change had come with the changing years, and the fires of youth had burnt themselves out, Dick Eliot recalled the strange stillness of the time and place—a stillness that, like his own, seemed aching

for utterance—and the ghost of a dead passion rose up in dreary mockery before him.

“One more turn, and then, *hélas!* I’m finished.”

Thus, Lydia Brooke, gliding by her companion with a momentary fluttering of feminine skirts, ere, the circle completed, she gracefully subsides on the prow of an old broken boat that, half embedded in the ice, thrusts itself out from amid the frozen reeds.

“Come here, Mr. Eliot, please, and see if you can’t make yourself useful. Just help me off with my skates, will you?”

Dick crosses over to where she sits, and kneels down before her. Miss Brooke puts forward a pretty little foot, slightly lifting her petticoat as she does so, and Dick mutely takes it in his hand.

“Good gracious, child ; how you tremble ! What’s the matter ?”

"Oh, Miss Brooke, Miss Brooke!—Lydia!"

Here, however, something rises in his throat and stops his utterance; but the lad's eyes are very eloquent as he lifts them from the feet of his idol to her face—a face which exercise has flushed with warm blood, and which looks down not unkindly on its youthful worshipper.

"You silly child!" says the governess, glancing quickly round her ere she lays her ungloved hand lightly on his shoulder. "Why, what *do* you mean?"

What indeed! The flood-gates of his heart are opened now, and a pretty outrush of passion succeeds. Somewhat indefinite and unpractical, thinks the lady, but beyond a doubt sincere, and quite capable of being turned into pleasurable, if not into profitable channels. She is not in the least touched by the boyish words of love and faith he pours forth; she sees neither the humour

nor the pathos of his glowing promises and plans for the future ; but she remembers his position as an only son, and listens to him with a tolerance that is very womanly. Besides (physically speaking) she is no languid, lukewarm nature, and a gentle responsive emotion tingles through her veins as the hot lips of youth are pressed upon her hand.

The pair make quite a picture—they and the accessories—in the solemn dusk of the wintry afternoon ; and their attitude is somewhat akin to that of the lady and gentleman in Millais' "Romans leaving Britain ;" for by this time Dick's head has dropped into Lydia Brooke's lap, and his arms are thrown round her waist. Rather a striking contrast, too, the picture presents—this unstudied "Landscape, with Figures." Youth and beauty and passion in the figures ; death and desolation in the landscape. Nature is ever at

harmony with herself, but, ah! the cruel discords of Nature and human nature! From Nature, indeed, we may no more expect sympathy than (to quote Mill) we may expect common human morality. George Eliot's poem, "How Lisa loved the King," speaking of the girl's despair, tells how the changing moon looked down upon her unchanged woe, and in like spirit of irony or indifference will weeping skies be stretched, as funeral palls, above the heads of happy bridal parties, or the keen merriment of sunshine make a mock of breaking hearts.





CHAPTER VIII.

OSCAR DALE.



THE call to dinner is as inexorable as the call to death. At its summons the ploughman takes his hand from the plough, the student turns his back on his books, the lover tears himself from the arms of his mistress. Then does the artizan throw down his tools, the poet his pen, the painter his brush. Young men and maidens, old men and children, alike give up their dearest pleasures and pursuits to go to dinner. The loom and the wheel may wait, the epic and the love-letter, the words of counsel and the whispers of affection—all these may wait,

but dinner must not. Come then, reader, with us to dinner !

Two hours, perhaps, have elapsed since the occurrence of the pleasing little episode described at the close of our last chapter. Miss Brooke and her pupils have been driven home to Draycott Manor, but not by our hero. Fain, indeed, would he have escorted them, but the arrival of his parents has detained him at the Hall, and the honour has passed into the hireling hands of his father's coachman. His head is in a whirl as he dresses himself for dinner in the doleful suit of sable which custom bids us wear on occasions of rejoicing and festivity, and a happy iteration of the afternoon's events goes on in his mind. Other mental process than this sweet retrospection he is, for the time, incapable of; nor is it until he is fairly wedged in at table that he begins to awaken to a sense of his surroundings.

A large party is assembled in the famous old banquet-hall of the Muffle Drummonds. Five-and-thirty or forty heads, perhaps, are bowed over their soup as Dick glances around him—heads old, middle-aged, and (less numerously) young. Bald and shining heads of county magnates (heads of families, in fact); elaborately bedizened heads of county magnates' wives; and here and there the oiled and curled locks and flower-decked tresses of senior sons and daughters. The talk, for the most part, is of the province, provincial; by no means the sparkling, light wine sort of converse one gets in London, but a steady flow of fine old crusted port, so to speak. For the party is essentially conservative, and loveth not the new-fangled.

At Dick's right hand is Miss Boddyman (Polly Boddyman), the Rector's daughter; on his left is little Mrs. Wyatt, of Beechley, fair, foolish, and faded, "insipid as the

Queen upon a card." Nearer the host, on the same side, are the rector, our hero's mother, and Sydney Draycott, who, it seems, has been induced to "assist" at the banquet, despite all prophecy to the contrary. Directly opposite to them are seated Charles Eliot, the eldest Miss Drummond, and the guest of the evening, Oscar Dale—a fair, slight built, rather listless-looking young man, who has duly attached himself to the daughter of the house.

"And so you like music, Mr. Dale?" Dick overhears Miss Drummond say to her companion, with a ceremonious show of interest. "And what kind, pray? Is it opera you prefer, or oratorio—the sacred or the profane?"

"Oh, profane, of course! Never could sit out an oratorio in my life. Aunt Dorothy took me to, what's-its-name, in the Strand—Exeter Hall—the only night I was in town

last week, and we had that thing of Handel's — 'Corn in Egypt,' isn't it? Eh? Beg pardon; 'Israel in Egypt,' as you say. Didn't like it; so I cut at the half."

Cut at the half! Poor Miss Drummond looks almost offended, and turns to her other neighbour, Mr. Eliot, who (shrewdly suspecting that Mr. Dale's Gothicism is but an assumption) is inly amused at her discomfiture. Young Dale meanwhile absently strokes the yellow wave of moustache that sweeps down each side his small, womanly mouth and smooth-shaven chin, and seems slightly bored.

"Ah, Boddyman!" suddenly exclaims Sir Hugo, catching sight of the Rector. "Glad to see you so, so—so near us. By-the-way, I don't think you have yet been presented to—to Mr. Dale, Mr. Oscar Dale? A future parishioner, Boddyman; a—a—a new member of the flock."

“An honorary member merely,” says Mr. Dale, adjusting his eyeglass as he acknowledges the introduction. “You see I don’t attend church myself; retired from the service, so to speak. But I send Simkins (Simkins is my man), and thus go there by what-do-you-call-it?—proxy. Aunt Dorothy says I shall go to heaven in the same way. That, however, is simply guesswork, as I tell her. Must be, mustn’t it?”

The quiet, abstracted, meditative manner in which all this is uttered, the obvious unconsciousness of saying anything in any degree unorthodox or objectionable, so far influences the Rev. Boddyman, that the frown of clerical protest gathering on his brow falters half way, and finally lapses into a feeble and embarrassed smile. An awkward pause ensues, but one of the delinquent’s relatives—Mrs. Allan Dale, of Little Upton—comes hastily to the rescue.

“Oscar,” explains she, in a general sort of way, and with a nervous, apologetic glance at her placid kinsman, “has lived a good deal abroad of late years, and hence, you conceive, his views are somewhat different from those of us stay-at-homes. *You* know, Mr. Draycott, how oddly people look at certain things on the other side the Channel?”

“Precisely so, my dear madam, precisely so. I—er—I recollect when I was at Dieppe how they used to look at the bathers. Through—er—through lorgnettes, you know—positively through lorgnettes! I remember, too, being in Paris . . .” And here Sydney Draycott glides smoothly off into a groove of personal reminiscence, interesting, probably, to himself, but not otherwise important, and in no way bearing on the point in question. By the time he has finished, the Rector has sufficiently recovered himself

to attempt Oscar Dale afresh, and blandly expresses his gratification at the acquisition to be conferred on the parish of Hethercote by his (Mr. Dale's) residence therein.

"Well, yes. They are trying to arrange Idlewild for me. But 'they,' I mean What's-his-name, the solicitor, and the other fellow, his agent," adds Mr. Dale, becoming dreamily explicit.

"Exactly," responds the rector, wholly unable to identify the persons thus alluded to, but feeling called on for some show of comprehension.

"I shouldn't, however, speak of my settling here as an acquisition—not if I were you, you know," continued Mr. Dale, thoughtfully caressing his moustache. "Fact is, I'm generally put down as one of the other sort. I find that people speak of me as a worldling, a backslider, outcast, son o' Belial, and so forth; but I don't remember

being called an acquisition. *Why* they give me such singular names, I can't say. Manners and customs of the English, perhaps?"

"The bigoted and uncharitable," says the poor Rector solemnly, "are peculiar neither to one people nor to one place. They are to be met with on every side, alike in the cities of men and—and elsewhere."

"Ah! Travelled much?"

This abrupt shifting of the subject seems to be one of the many unconventionalities of Mr. Oscar Dale, and is accompanied by a sudden lifting of his dark eyelash, and a sudden keen outlook from his steel-blue eyes that, for the moment, revolutionises the whole external of the man, fairly staggering one by the rebuff it gives to all one's preconceived notions of the languor and quiescence of his character. For in that brief glance are revealed energy, shrewd observation, and a

rare and searching penetration. It is as startling as though some dreamy, opium-drowsed Malay should suddenly wake up from his torpor and flash forth his creese from the black sheath that hid it, without word or warning; and the Rev. Boddymen is so disconcerted by the glimpse thus given him of qualities hitherto wholly unsuspected, that the question addressed him has to be repeated ere an answer is elicited.

“Travelled much?” says Mr. Dale, lapsing once more into the lotus-eater’s state of listlessness which appears wontedly to characterise him. “Been much abroad?”

Truth compels the Rector to admit that he has never been beyond his native shores, whereat the interest of his *vis-à-vis* obviously dwindles and dies, and the look of resigned boredom returns to his face. As for the guests in his immediate vicinity, they have listened to his utterances with—to speak

figuratively—tingling ears. Never, surely, did man speak in this wise ; or, at least, not in their presence. How to take it, is the query that secretly vexes the soul of each individual ; for the social rank and fortune of the owner of Idlewild render this a most delicate problem ; nor is it until the tact of that admirable woman, Mrs. Eliot of The Leas (who always sees things so exactly in their proper light), suggests a solution, that the general mind is relieved of its perplexing sense of doubt and responsibility.

“So delightfully eccentric,” whispered Mrs. Eliot to her neighbour ; and the key-note, once struck, soon swells into an harmonious chorus. Eccentric ! I thank thee for that word. It covereth a multitude of sins. It obviates every difficulty, and expresses society’s view of the matter to a nicety. Quoth Madame de B——, discussing the *post-mortem* prospects of a certain deceased

grandee, "God thinks twice before he damns a sinner of such distinction;" and, in like manner, Mrs. Eliot and her peers are disposed to be slow in condemning a person of Oscar Dale's position and property.

At length the dinner drags its slow course (or courses) to a close, and the ladies file out of the room—for the party, as we have said, is strictly conservative, and tenaciously adheres to this barbarous banishment of its better-half—the two last fair creatures with their arms affectionately entwined round each other's waist.

"Close up, gentlemen, close up!" chirps Sir Hugo. "And—and—and, pray help yourselves. Mr. Dale, let me recommend you this port. No? You prefer the claret? Dear, dear, dear! You young men have quite lost the—the—the tastes of your fathers—quite lost 'em—quite lost 'em. You—you drink nothing—positively nothing!"

And the old gentleman heaves a sigh over the degeneracy of the English race, which has suffered the divine worship of Bacchus to decline into the unhallowed hands of the vulgar herd.

“Know who that youngster is over the way?” asks Mr. Dale, in an undertone, of Mr. Eliot, with whom, since the withdrawal of Miss Drummond, he has struck up an acquaintance.

“That’s my son,” says Mr. Eliot. “Dick, here’s a gentleman speaking of you.”

“Seen you before, my friend,” says Mr. Dale, nodding cheerfully across the table to our hero. “This afternoon. Didn’t see me, though, I dare say?”

“No, I didn’t see you,” answers Dick, bluntly, rousing himself from his reverie.

“Ah! too much engaged, no doubt. Samson and Delilah, and that sort of thing. I

love my love with an A, because she is Affable? And so on, and so on."

The colour flames hotly up into Dick's cheeks, and he stammers forth in confusion :

"Why we—I mean I—where were you, sir?"

"Coming through the wood. You see, when I got into the park, I let my man go on with the trap, and tried a short cut to the house. I thought, perhaps, the skating wouldn't be all over, and I wanted to catch something of it. Too late, however: only saw you."

"Hallo, young man!" exclaimed Mr. Elliot, in a tone of mock severity; "what's all this? Pray, will you explain, or I shall ask Mr. Dale?"

"No, no, no!" interposes the last-named, compassionating Dick's embarrassment. "We don't kiss and tell. It's like my assurance to speak of the matter at all, and I beg

offer your son my apologies. Let's speak of something else."

And with a kindly, confidential smile at our hero, he strikes off into such a fresh, original trail of talk that Dick is very shortly at his ease again, listening with genuine amusement and interest to the converse of his two neighbours opposite. But the prior allusions of Mr. Dale have reached other ears besides those for which they were specially intended. Young Ulric Drummond has been a silent and unobserved auditor from the beginning, and some sudden intuition, born and bred of jealousy, would seem to have helped him to an interpretation of the passing dialogue. A dull and angry flush has darkened his brow, and he eyes our unconscious hero with furtive glances of suspicion and distaste. For he too cherishes his *petits souvenirs* of Miss Lydia Brooke, and instinctively recognises a rival. Albeit, for the

present, he holds his peace, drinking deeply, and maintaining, for the rest of the evening, "the uncommunicating muteness of fishes."





CHAPTER IX.

THE COURSE OF TRUE LOVE.



HE upshot of the great Muffle Drummond dinner, and of sundry subsequent gatherings and discussions, was that the candidature of Mr. Oscar Dale for the county was reluctantly negatived. That gentleman, indeed, was himself the foremost to scout the notion.

“ I a ‘ fit and proper ’ person ! Why, my dear souls—you’ll permit me to call you my dear souls?—what in the world do you take me for ? Sensible of the honour, and that sort of thing, of course ; but really, you know, *really* Well, well ! Let’s say no more about

it. Shake hands all round"—(this to the deputation)—"and drop it. We'll get Wyatt o' Beechley, or Pitt o' Brookham (splendid fellow, Pitt o' Brookham ; so's Wyatt !), to come forward, and I'll—Yes ! Look here ! I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll go over and talk to the free-and-eas—free and independent electors of Norwich, and ask 'em for their vote and what-you-may-call-it — interest. *That's* all settled, then ! And now let's have something to drink."

Thus genially did Mr. Dale put aside the proposal with which he was visited ; but, although he persistently declined the dignity his neighbours would fain have conferred upon him, he contrived to do so in a way that rendered his refusal a void offence. His liberality in subscribing to the County Hunt (and, indeed, in the matter of subscriptions generally) ; his sportsmanlike conduct in the field ; and his off-hand hospitality, made him

almost popular in spite of his notoriously unconventional, unconservative mode of speech and action, and he became a sort of chartered libertine in respect to the licence allowed him in affairs social and political. The circle of his acquaintance widened in every direction, but with only a limited number of fellow-creatures did he arrive at terms of actual intimacy.

Among these few were our friends the Eliots, toward whom he had early evinced a partiality. The "sweetness and light" of Charles Eliot's character attracted him from the first; and, indeed, there was much that was akin in the natures of these two men. Mrs. Eliot he admired for the placid consistency of her views (alike temporal and spiritual), for the well-preserved charms of her person, and for the gracious reception she invariably accorded him at The Leas. With regard to our hero, the freshness, ardour,

and susceptibility of that young gentleman awakened his liveliest interest and sympathy. All generous souls take delight in youth, as poetic souls take delight in spring, and are touched by its hopeful promise, its unsullied faith and verdure, its mysterious quickening, and the beauty of its manifold births. Oscar Dale soon made friends with Dick, becoming an easy-going, informal Mentor to the lad's Telemachus. The pair took long, rambling, cross-country walks about the county, dropping into all sorts of wayside and village hostelries, where they would regale themselves on bread-and-cheese and beer, and freely fraternise with the local worthies that frequented these humble places of entertainment. Whether it were Will the keeper, Tom the poacher, Bob the blacksmith, or Jeremiah the parish sexton, was a matter of indifference to Mr. Dale ; he made himself equally at home with all ; and, in subsequent

converse with Dick Eliot, the glib allusions to strange, outlandish hamlets and hospices—such as the “Ringers” at Trunch, Knapton “Goat and Compasses” (a corruption of the old Puritan watchword, “*God encompasseth us!*”), Swafeld “Barley Mow,” Tit-tisall “Great A,” and so on—struck their auditors with that sense of utter blankness and unfamiliarity with which one hears a person quote—say Browning’s “Sordello.”

Dick’s mental development at this period, under the subtle, fructifying influences of both love and friendship, went forward rapidly. New lights broke in upon him ; his stock of ideas sensibly increased and multiplied ; and, in secret, he began to put his passion into rhyme, after the wont of clever lads in his condition, sowing his “wild oats in tame verse.” These poetic bantlings (poor little love-children, whom their parent afterwards became ashamed of, and refused to acknow-

ledge!) were all addressed "To Lydia," a name with a fine classical flavour about it, and one to which sonnets have been dedicated time out of mind. No actual personality, therefore, need have been implied by their generic title; and, indeed, in those later days just alluded to, their author, even admitting their origin, was known to deny the existence of any other than abstract inspiration. But still—putting this and that together, as a shrewd historian is bound to do—we cannot but record our belief that this denial on the part of Mr. Richard Eliot was not made with that strict regard for truth which wontedly characterised his speech; in short, we think that he was telling fibs, and have little doubt that the Lydia in question was identical with that Miss Lydia Brooke whom we can prove to have been governess in his god-father's family at the time.

Tramping through the mire and mist of the

bedraggled days of February, riding amid the dripping woods or across the saturated common, Dick would fondly repeat to himself these firstlings of his brain in an impassioned undertone. Sometimes he would seek the coast, and, pacing the solitary beach, would declaim, Demosthenes-like, in the face of the great windy plain of waters itself. Oh! the audacity and conceit of youthful authorship! Fancy presuming to spout one's feeble, unprofitable jingle of ill-rhymed platitudes before such an awful audience as Ocean! The derisive scream of the sea-gull, the huge, explosive laughs of the loosened winds, the ominous gathering and sweeping charge of the rearing wave, and then the long, thunderous crash and blind up-flinging of foam—these things might have stricken dumb a Dante or a Shakspeare, but, somehow or other, they failed to confound our hero. In extenuation, we may say that his

mood at least had something of congenial passion and sublimity in it ; and if there was a painful inadequacy of expression in his efforts to give that mood a voice (as there certainly was), an author's partiality prevented him from seeing the discrepancy. Dick honestly believed in the genius of his juvenile muse, and was genuinely affected by its utterances.

Assuredly these days were among the most blissful of his life, albeit he was dwelling in a fool's paradise. The pleasure of love is in loving, says La Rochefoucauld ; we are happier in the passion we feel than in that we excite. Dick's affections were so fervid and liberal, so engrossing in the delicious novelty of their development, that it is small wonder he failed to take strict count of the value of the returns he received ; nor could a lad of seventeen be expected, indeed, to analyse a woman's caresses, and coldly to

decide whether a kiss were a Jacob-kiss, meaning pure devotion and years of patient fidelity, or whether it were a Judas-kiss, begotten of worldly greed and tending to betrayal. Such fine discrimination (if attained at all) is the acquirement of a later age.

So the weeks went by ; and the first snow-drop (the white flag of surrender which winter, starving and hard-pressed, hangs out before the gathering forces of spring) was seen in the land. Anon, from over sea, came the fierce March winds, as of old came the blustering Northmen, to vex and harry the Isle of Britain. Intervals of truce, when the sun would shine and the hours be meek and baby-breathed, now and again occurred ; and a subtle, pervading sense of renewal and revival awakened thrills of quicker life in the hearts of men.

One morning, after a night of rain, Dick found himself in the plantation at the back

of Draycott Manor; and with him was Miss Brooke.

“Fancy your finding me here! *Mais c’est drôle, par exemple!* How in the world did you guess my whereabouts? Say!”

“You told me yesterday you were coming,” answers Dick, rather gloomily. “You said you meant to look for primroses if it were fine, and so——”

“And so you thought you would come also to look for primroses. Very well, then; let us go seek them. But why do you appear so *triste*, my friend? You seem quite cross.”

“Didn’t I tell you that I’m going away—to Oxford—on Thursday?” asks Dick, reproachfully. “And you don’t seem to care one bit, Lydia.”

“Indeed, dear child, but I *do* care! I shall miss you very much, you know, and shall think of you very often.” (This in a tone of cheerful prophecy, as of one who lays

down a programme of minor pleasures for a rainy day.) "I dare say, though, you'll soon forget me?"

"*Forget* you! Oh, Lydia!"

"Well, perhaps not. I believe, after all, you really care for me a little. As that last sweet poem of yours says, 'Though Fate's decree should bid us part For years, perchance for aye, Still shall each fond and constant heart——'"

"'Fond and *faithful* heart,'" corrects Dick, in a low voice.

"Yes, 'each fond and faithful heart Retain—remain, I mean—remain, remain——.' Oh, it's perfectly lovely!" And here, Miss Brooke, who has forgotten the context, breaks off into raptures, and declares that every word of the poem is engraved indelibly on her heart. "Your verses," says she, "always remind me of—a—of Kirke White's."

This happens to be the first name that comes into the governess's head, and the comparison, it must be admitted, is rather a bold stroke. It proves, however, sufficiently successful, for Dick has not yet made acquaintance with the gentle, butcher-born sonneteer, although he resolves to do so on his return home without further delay.

The pair saunter along the narrow woodland track, across which the light falls in slanting rays, making splashes of sudden colour on the dark, wet tree-trunks, and intensifying the vivid green of the spongy moss that overpads their burrowing roots. The shadow of coming separation is upon Dick's brow, but Miss Brooke confides him her hand, and he is comforted. The young gentleman speaks of love and of constancy, of truth and of trust, of hope and of ambition, and of divers kindred topics, with considerable feeling and sentiment, although, we must

confess, without any great originality. The lady listens, shows sympathy by an occasional pressure of the fingers, and derives, it is to be presumed, a certain measure of gratification in thus employing her senses of touch and hearing.

“In April, Lydia, I shall be seventeen. I shall remain at Oxford until I have got my degree (which won’t be very long, you know !), and then I shall come back and tell the governor about you. Dear old governor ! He always lets me have my way ; and when he hears how my happiness is concerned, I’m sure he’ll give his consent at once, like—like a gentleman !”

This, and much more to a similar effect, does Dick enunciate, with kindling eyes and heart, vowing to “live and love worthily, bear and be bold,” and mapping out the future with a touching simplicity and confidence. Miss Brooke has a delicate part to

play, but it is a woman's part, and she plays it. She gracefully avoids committing herself by any definite pledge to her boy-lover (having certain private reasons for her reticence); she promises, however, to write to him at Oxford; and, when they part, she surrenders her ripe lips to his embrace with a readiness that is wholly natural and spontaneous. Then she goes home to her pupils, whose juvenile ailments have sanctioned her morning's absence from the class-room; whilst our hero, on his side, retires in a state of foolish intoxication. Later in the day Miss Brooke writes a long letter to a certain bosom-friend in Boulogne—a letter from which we quote the closing passage, as bearing more or less directly on our present history:

“ You remember, *chère amie*, my mentioning in my last epistle a certain young gentle-

man named Eliot, who had been making eyes at me from the first moment we met? *Eh, bien! il est vraiment épris de moi, ce pauvre garçon*, and I really think if I willed it I might one day become Mrs. Eliot, junior. He belongs to a sufficiently good family, is an only son, and not at all bad-looking—something like that little Louis Dumont of yours at Paris. (Don't you recollect Louis, and the *vacances* we spent together at old Madame Lesage's *pensionnat*?) But then he is quite a child, *et je n'aime que les hommes faits, moi*. (How refreshing it is to return to French again after hearing nothing but English—and *such* English as one hears in Norfolk—for so many months!) Besides, another thing, *mignonne*, is that this young Eliot will not be his own master until at least four years, and at my age, *hélas!* one cannot afford to wait such an eternity for any man—or, certainly, but for a very few. I have,

moreover, still a possibility—what do I say ? —*two* possibilities before me, either of which, *entre nous*, would be a better catch than Monsieur E.

“No. 1 is no less a person than the son of a baronet—a second son, it is true ; but then the elder brother is *imbécile*, has fits and things, and is always shut up out of sight. People say he will not live, and in that case, you see, *my* admirer becomes heir to the title and estate of his father, Sir Hugo, who is already old. This second son of whom I speak rides beautiful horses about the neighbourhood here, and not seldom, *bien entendu*, in the special neighbourhood of your friend Lydia. I have chanced to meet him repeatedly, and he has lately sent me some very pretty presents. But more of this in my next.

“And now as to No. 2 ! What do you think, *ma bonne Marie*, of a widower with

five children—such a widower, in fact, as my employer, Mr. Sydney Draycott? Certainly he has *said* nothing very particular at present; but then, as we know, there are more ways of expression than that of words, and for the past six weeks or so he has been astonishingly interested—*personally* interested—in the progress of his children's education. *N'est ce pas que j'ai l'embarras de choix?*

“*Adieu, chère Marie. Je t'embrasse de tout cœur.*

“*Bien à toi,*

“LYDIA.”





CHAPTER X.

A CHANGE OF SCENE.

IN April afternoon. The sunlight ripples and flashes along the brimming river, sparkles on the fresh, moist meadowland, with its affluence of many-bladed verdure, and fills the budding wood with the glad radiance of its smile. A lisping wind is moving amid the new-born leaves, and stirring lightly through the breezy belt of sedges that lines the water-side. From across the fields the first cuckoo-call (laden with what memories of dead springs!) may now and again be heard; the mellow fluting of the blackbird echoes

through the coppice ; and the sweet-tongued thrush, seated on the topmost spray of the blossoming hawthorn—

“ Trails her plain ditty in one long-spun note
Through the sleek passage of her open throat,
A clear, unwrinkled song.”

What freshness, what fragrance, what dewy brightness is abroad ! Spring is come ! Spring, the young fairy prince, whose magic touch has wakened the sleeping beauty, Nature, from her long winter-trance, and set free the spell-bound sources of song and scent and colour ! All night, in the silence and darkness, the sap stirs and quickens under the rugged bark ; and when the morn is come, the tender film of green that hangs like a mist about the wood is made denser by a million tiny shoots and leaflets. Subtly and unceasingly the wondrous work of regeneration goes on ; every day is a birthday of buds—every hour pregnant with manifold life.

The scene is the Thames, between Oxford and Abingdon; the precise place, Nuneham Courtenay. Hence the shining river, the sun-flecked meadows, the radiant woods. From afar off comes the measured pulse-beat of a college "eight," faint at first, but growing louder and clearer with every minute, until one hears the creaking and complaining of rowlocks and stretchers, the lift and rush of the light boat through the eddying water, and the voice of the coxswain tutoring his crew. Anon, we catch sight of them—and what a sight it is! Match it if you can, my young French friends, my well-beloved German students! Methinks we pretty well know where and how this April afternoon is being spent by *you*, my lads! Pierre and Jules are at the Café d'Homme Galant (*pas vrai, mes amis?*) indulging in "the athletic game of dominoes;" whilst, as for Fritz and Hans, we doubt not we could

readily "spot" the particular smoky *Gastwirthschaft* where they are flourishing and thumping down the dirty, cornerless cards in the intellectual excitement of "*Sechs-und-Sechzig*."

With a steady, harmonious swing of lithe bodies, a flashing of level oars, a rhythmical sound of by-flowing waters, the "eight" passes smoothly, swiftly onward, leaves the pleasant woods of Nuneham behind, glides beneath the black shadow of the railway bridge, increases its pace in the broad reach beyond, and so speeds forward, until the "Easy all!" of the coxswain brings them gradually to a halt at the head of the Abingdon lock.

The crew is on the bank now; eight clean-limbed young Englishmen, quick-breathing after the last sharp spurt, but all (according to the wont of Englishmen) seeking to disguise their little symptoms of distress from each other and from the critical eye of the coxswain.

“Rather a breather — that from the bridge,” says one to his neighbour, having, with an effort, controlled the slight unsteadiness that threatens his voice.

“Yes, *rathér*.”

“Feel blown?”

“I?—no. Do you?”

“Well, not *blown*, of course! But just the least in the world winded, you know. Fact is, I did a beer at Sandford.”

“Deuce you did! What a fellow you are for malt!”

“Couldn’t help myself, Eliot. Went to Tyndal’s ‘wine’ last night, and woke this morning with a tongue like sandpaper; might have struck a match on it.”

“Feel rather dry myself now. I suppose old Everett ’ll let us take a drink at Abingdon?”

“’Course he will. We’re to leave the boat here till to-morrow, and walk back this even-

ing. Everett's just telling the lock-keeper about it."

"To-morrow, then, we shall have to come by the afternoon train, and pull home?"

"Yes, confound it! That's the blessed programme, I'll take odds. Are you ready? Let's make a start, then, and we'll have a quiet game of billiards before we go back. I'll show you a better table than that at the Eagle. Not so coarse in the cloth, you know—less like playing on a sheep's back!"

By this time the crew has enwrapped itself in dark blue boating-coat and white woollen muffler, and is straggling leisurely along the towing-path toward the town. Foremost are the two speakers whose conversation we have just quoted—Eliot and his friend Teddy Swift, both of St. Sepulchre's. Six weeks at Oxford have not been without their effect on our hero, and in donning his freshman's gown he would seem

to have assumed the *toga virilis* with a certain becoming sense of its significance. Nor is his separation from his mistress all bitterness and heart-sickness, as, in the exaggeration of his young despair, he had at first supposed it would be. Life, he discovers, has attractions for him even apart from Lydia Brooke. What Hoffmann calls "the sweet habitude of being"—mere animal existence—is sufficient to occupy his days without the aid of any violent delights or divine sorrows; and this, indeed, should be the case with every healthy youngster on the growing side of twenty. In after years one loses one's early appetite for living, and needs some sort of emotional *sauce piquante* to help one through one's time.

On entering the town, our two fellow-students made the best of their way to the billiard-room which Mr. Edward Swift had in view for their proposed game. It

was found—and is yet to be found, we believe—at the Goose and Gridiron, a certain small, old-fashioned hostelry in the neighbourhood of the church. Following his friend, Dick Eliot threaded a narrow sandstrewn passage, stumbled up a steep, dimly-lighted staircase, and, pushing open a swing-door covered with tattered baize, beheld the billiard-room itself.

A young girl—not more than sixteen, perhaps, with the sleeves of her print dress rolled up to her elbows—was seated on the end of the table, idly swinging her feet to and fro. A pretty girl, certainly, but withal terribly untidy. At the moment that the two gentlemen appeared she was in the act of applying a fresh-drawn pot of porter to her lips, and, after burying her face in the tankard for a second or so, she emerged, like Venus, from the foam.

“Morning, Phœbe,” said Swift. “Hope I see you well?”

“Nicely, thank’ee; how’s yourself?” answered the girl, glibly, sliding to her feet as she spoke, and drawing the back of her hand deliberately across her mouth. “Want a game? Billiards or pyramids?”

“Billiards, please—a hundred up. You’ll not give me points, I suppose, Eliot? By the way, this is my friend Eliot, Phœbe.”

“Oh, I know. Heard Mr. Tyndall speak about *you*,” said the girl, turning toward our hero. “You rode his horse last week at the match here, didn’t you? That was the day I was away. He says you’re a very good fellow. Are you?”

“Well—I scarcely know,” stammered Dick, somewhat taken aback. “At all events, you’d think me a very conceited one if I said yes.”

The girl smiled, shrugged her shoulders, and proceeded to clear the table for play, whereupon Swift took the initiative by giving the conventional miss in baulk.

“One—love,” called the girl, marking the game with the mechanical promptness of habit, the while her gaze, however, wandered idly toward the window and away over the breezy April distance. Always inordinately susceptible to female presence, Dick Eliot from time to time glanced at her as she sat tilting back her chair against the white-washed wall—the “jigger,” wherewith she could move the marking-pegs without rising, held wand-wise in her hand.

Fair-haired and blue-eyed was this maid of the inn, who acted as billiard-marker to mine host of the Goose and Gridiron—a slim, pliant, active, half lawless-looking figure, oddly at variance with its surroundings. Born in a keeper’s cottage, in the leafy heart of a Welsh valley, where a tumbling trout stream fed the green solitude with sound, Phœbe Langham had grown from childhood to maidenhood in a state of happy

vagrancy, the woods and hills her playground, the keeper's dogs her playfellows. For a dozen glad years she had followed the devices and desires of her own gipsy heart in absolute freedom, as genuine a daughter of Dame Nature as ever was dryad or oread of old. Nature, indeed, supplied the place of the mother she had lost in infancy, and fostered the forlorn little one to the best of her ample abilities. But this state of things was not destined to last. Ere Phoebe was thirteen she was left parentless, her father, the keeper, being slain, one moonless autumn night, in a poaching fray. Then it was that the girl came to Abingdon, taking up her abode at the Goose and Gridiron, of which house her uncle, old Joe Langham, was landlord. Thenceforward her life was an altered one, and the sweet open-air licence and liberty of earlier days became as a dream to her. Such dream as this may

have dwelt with Proserpine—a dream of Sicilian summers and the flower-decked meads of Enna—in looking backward from the shadow-haunted shores of Hades.

Not that Phœbe Langham was greatly given to dreaming, retrospective or otherwise. Phœbe was a born Bohemian, and displayed a philosophic, Mark Tapleyish spirit under adversity, which could not be too highly commended. Indeed, it was only this natural buoyancy which kept her afloat on the sea of troubles she seemed destined to encounter, even as stray straws, forsaken corks, and the like—things deficient in gravity and purpose—will outride storms that send their weightier brethren to the bottom. Full of jest and youthful jollity, and with a disregard of the morrow complete enough to be courageous, she adapted herself to her new surroundings with cheerful equanimity. Since her election to the office of

billiard-marker by her beer-bemused old uncle, the publican, the fame of her pretty face, her nimble wit, had spread abroad among the golden youth of the neighbouring university, and had made the Goose and Gridiron a favourite house of call for such of the students as were wont to visit Abingdon. Phoebe was eminently sociable; and even if the grim old fairy, Lindley Murray, *had* stayed away from her christening and withheld the gift of grammar from her tongue, her speech was invariably natural, easy, and expressive.

“Tell you what, Eliot,” exclaimed Swift, at the conclusion of the first game. “I vote we give Everett and the other fellows the slip. They won’t wait for us, you know; and instead of tramping back at six, we might hire a trap of Joe Langham here, and tool over at eight?”

Dick shook his head.

“Oh, hang it! why not? Langham ’ll find us a horse and trap, I’m sure. Let’s just ask him. Where’s Mr. Langham, Phœbe?”

“Mr. Langham is in bed with—with what’s-a-name,” said Phœbe.

“Mrs. Langham, let’s hope,” interjected Swift, *sotto voce*.

“With lumbago,” continued the girl, gravely. “And he isn’t nice to visit just now neither. Only open his door, and he’d as lief chuck boots at your head as look at you—I think liefer!”

“Pleasant old party! Perhaps, then, Eliot, we’d better not disturb him, after all. We can easily get a conveyance elsewhere; so just say you’ll stop, and I’ll start a fresh game.”

“As you like, Swift; have it your own way. Only mind! there’ll be a jolly row.”

(Parenthetically, what a characteristic form

of expression this is! How the rough courage of the Briton, who laughs at danger and difficulty, and disappointment and overthrow—who “grins and bears it,” and “comes up smiling”—how it crops out in this grotesque application of the adjective! A young man, say, quarrels with his father, and straightway is turned adrift upon the world to sink or swim, as luck may have it. Very well! Hereafter, working with his pal, beneath the blinding sun, through the mud and refuse of a Californian gully; or begging tobacco of his stockman on some lonely Australian sheep-run; or patiently blacking his officer’s boots in some gusty, ill-ventilated English barracks—he will refer, with a smile, to the disagreement which has altered the whole course of his existence as “a jolly row!”

Take another instance. Two half-naked men meet in a twelve-foot ring, pound each

other out of all semblance to humanity, perhaps get disfigured for life—and we cheerfully record the encounter as “a merry mill.”

A still more famous illustration is afforded by the description of the tournament in “Ivanhoe.” “Although,” says Scott, “only four knights, including one who was smothered by the heat of his armour, had died upon the field, yet upwards of thirty were desperately wounded, four or five of whom never recovered. Several more were disabled for life; and those who escaped best carried the marks of the conflict to the grave with them. Hence” (note the *hence*) “it is always mentioned in the old records as the Gentle and Joyous Passage of Arms of Ashby.”

The two students, Richard Eliot and Edward Swift, played billiards, drank beer, smoked cigars, talked slang, and conducted

themselves generally after the established wont of Young Oxford until eight p.m., Miss Langham duly attending their behests. Although a better player than his adversary, our hero contrived to lose the majority of the games they contested, for his attention was considerably diverted from the balls by the young person named Phœbe. The girl's spontaneous, irresponsible prattle, and the easy tone of fellowship she assumed in addressing her companions were something novel to his small experience of womankind, and novelty had ever an especial charm for him.

"A penny for your thoughts," said Phœbe once, in an interval of play, encountering the gaze he turned towards her.

Dick started, and stammered :

"I beg your pardon, but, really, I——"

"Won't sell 'em for a penny?" broke in the young lady, cheerfully. "Very

well, then! I'll toss you tuppence or nothing?"

Dick intimated that his thoughts was not for sale at any price.

"Meaning it's no business of mine, I s'pose? All right! Don't you think too much, though—'t isn't good for you. I once went to the theatre, and saw a piece called *Julia Seizer*, where there's two fellers named Brutus and Cashus—bad lots, both of 'em! And Seizer, he don't half like Cashus; he fancies fat men better. Cashus, he says, always looks peckish; he thinks too much, and that makes him dangerous. So just you mind what you're about, Mr. Eliot!"

"Yes, I'll be careful," said Dick, smiling. "I've seen the piece myself, by-the-way, and know all about it."

"Have you, though? Well, isn't it jolly? Don't you like that part where what's-his-name gets up in the market-place, and keeps

saying, ‘For Ber-rewtus is a nonourable man!’”

The way in which Phœbe Langham delivered herself of this quotation, striking an attitude as she spoke, was so absurdly suggestive of the stilted and stagey original she had witnessed, that the two young men broke into an involuntary peal of laughter, the girl good-humouredly joining.

“It’s all very well for you two to call out, but that’s just how he did it, I’m sure! First, you know, he hoisted up his eyebrows—so; then he smiled, in a sort of sarcastic way, like a thingamy—a hyena before it begins to laugh; and then came his speech about Brutus being an honourable man. Oh, it was fine!”

As the measured strokes of eight boomed sonorously over the housetops from the belfry of the neighbouring church, Dick and his friend descended to the stable-yard of the Goose

and Gridiron, where a dogcart (hired from an adjacent mews) was waiting their convenience.

“Bye-bye!” called out Swift, waving his hand in the direction of the billiard-room windows, which overlooked the yard.

“Good-bye,” said Phœbe Langham, leaning out upon the sill. “Good-bye, Mr. Eliot.”

“Good-bye,” responded Dick, raising his hat.

The horse's head was released by the groom in charge, who straightway jumped up on the back seat of the conveyance. Dick glanced round over his shoulder as they turned out of the long cobble-stoned yard into the street, and, thrown into strong relief by the bright light behind her, beheld the girlish form of Phœbe Langham still lingering at the open window of the deserted billiard-room. A sense of something lonely, forlorn,

unfriended, in her position struck him at the sight, awaking his ready sympathies, and appealing, with a thrill of subtle suggestion, to his poetic fancy. To an ordinary observer the thing was ordinary enough—as, indeed, most things are ordinary to ordinary people—but imagination, like moonshine, softens and etherealises whatsoever it touches. A girl at a window, with the familiar accessories of night and stars, may seem, perhaps, sufficiently commonplace; but the poet, to whom nothing is commonplace, lays hold of this simple material, and presently reproduces it in some such rare, heart-haunting scene, fraught with beauty and passion, as that which reveals the fateful love of Juliet.

“What do you think of Phoebe Langham?” said Swift, suddenly, throwing away the stump of his cigar.

“Eh? I beg your pardon?”

“What do you think of Phoebe Langham?”

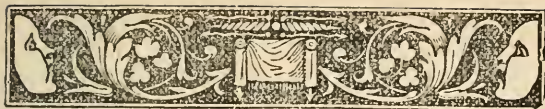
“Of Phœbe Langham?”

“Yes. What do you think of her?”

“Oh! I—I don’t know,” said Dick.

And he didn’t.





CHAPTER XI.

“MAN PROPOSES.”



APRIL passed, and the hedges grew white beneath the scented snows of May. In the meadows the grass was lush and odorous; the pastures were yellow with crowfoot, and the gardens had come in for their golden heritage of laburnum. All the air was laden with perfume—the delicate perfume of the wild-brier and the woodbine, the richer fragrance of the lilac and the guelder-rose. Now the hours were ever jocund with the song of birds; for, soon as a gleam of twilight gladdened the east, the skylark—God’s poet—

was lifting its hymn of praise heavenward ; whilst, throughout the dewy darkness between sunset and sunrise, the nightingale poured forth the fulness of its heart, flooding the countryside with melodious passion.

On an evening of this same merry month of May, Miss Brooke might have been seen loitering slowly through a Norfolk lane, or a *loke*, as in East Anglian dialect it is called. The sun had not wholly disappeared, but day was fast drawing to its close ; and, as the tuneless cawing of the wordy rooks subsided with the waning light, a dim silence stole over the widespread landscape. A short half-dozen leagues away was the many-voiced city, with a glare of gas in its narrow streets, a roll of wheels, and the hum of shifting crowds ; but out here in the country the hour was one of infinite tenderness and repose. Save for the faint, wandering sounds of the farmstead, and the fainter sound of the sea as

it broke on the beach and retired with a prolonged chattering of loose shingle, nothing arose to trespass against the sweet twilight-truce. A godlike hush and harmony prevailed over all.

What should be the mood of one to be in unison with external Nature at such a moment? A gentle, a pure, a loving and lovable mood; surely. What was the mood of Lydia Brooke, lingering in the lane that skirted the woods of Hethercote Hall, a solitary witness of the placid beauty of the eventide? She paused to pluck a spray of honeysuckle from the hedge, and meditated thus :

“ If Mr. Draycott means to make me Mrs. D., as I believe he does, it will be wiser to throw over young Eliot, and give Master Drummond his *cong  * without further doubt or delay.”

The gentleman last alluded to was at that

moment on his way to meet Miss Brooke, an unwonted brightness in his eye, a seed of ennobling thought, love-begotten, in his heart. Under the purifying influence of a strong unselfish passion, the low nature of the man awoke to higher promptings, and attained a certain graciousness foreign to its ordinary currents. Nor was Ulric Muffle Drummond enjoying a monopoly of this "divine afflatus." Over at Oxford, his rival, Dick Eliot, was seated at an upper casement of the venerable college of St. Sepulchre, looking down on the twilit quadrangle, and musing fondly on his absent idol. *Ach, du lieber Gott!* the waste of generous emotion, the unprofitable spending of soul, that goes on in this pitiful little planet of ours! Sons and daughters of men, we all start in life with a given patrimony of love; but in nine cases out of ten we squander our inheritance, dissipate our small heart-fortune, in the blindest and most improvident

of manners. What is the result? As the years pass on we find our original possession so woefully diminished, that we have to be close and penurious, saving our affections, and doling out, alas! a carefully-counted *rouleau* of small change where before we would have bestowed a handful of untold gold. Ah! how mean and miserly, how niggardly and distrustful, we have become! Whereas, had we only made a wise investment of our capital in youth, instead of playing at ducks and drakes with it, it might have been returning us cent. per cent., nor need we now be shivering solitarily on the brink of bankruptcy. It is an evil hour, brethren, when, drawing a draft on love, we get it back on our hands with the answer—“no effects.”

The leisurely chiming of a clock, borne over the still tree-tops from the Hall stables, aroused Miss Brooke from the reverie into which she had fallen; and, a second or two

later, was heard the rapid hoof-beat of an approaching horse. The animal was evidently at a gallop—a fact which Miss Brooke, guessing at its rider, promptly ascribed to a lover's impatience. Herein, however, she was mistaken. Instead of Ulric Muffle Drummond, the horseman turned out to be his groom, who, at sight of the lady, pulled hard at his bridle, and brought his panting steed to a standstill.

"Beg pardon, miss," said the man, touching his hat and speaking in hurried tones ; "but did you happen to come by the way o' the willage?"

"No. Why?"

"Thought perhaps you might ha' seen th' young master, miss. I'm arter 'im, and where to look for 'im I know no more nor the dead ! His brother, Mr. Roger, ha' bin took wi' a fit, miss, and 'ont last a hour, the doctor say. Servant t' ye, miss."

And, touching his hat once more, the groom put spurs to his horse and abruptly disappeared, leaving Miss Brooke, standing in mid-lane, to ponder over his intelligence at her leisure.

A word from her lips would have detained the man, but this word had not been spoken ; and now there rose up within her a sudden half-acknowledged desire that the messenger might not fall in with his master ere the impending meeting with herself.

Fate, or fortune, or whatever it may be which favours the Misses Brooke of this lower sphere, was on her side ; for when, at the expiration of some five or six minutes, the young gentleman in question arrived at his appointment, it was clearly apparent that no inkling of the course of events at the Hall had yet reached him.

"Evening to you, Miss Brooke. Awfully good of you to come here in answer to my

note. I was afraid you might cut up rough about it—be offended, you know.”

Miss Brooke gently returned the emphatic squeeze of the hand with which she was greeted, and sighed softly.

“When one has so few real friends as I, Mr. Drummond, one cannot afford to be easily offended with them.”

“That’s all right, then!” exclaimed her companion, somewhat inappositely, the while he slashed nervously with his cane at the projecting twigs of the hedgerow. “It’ll be—I mean I—you read my note?”

“Oh, yes! I read the note.”

“Ah! See the postscript—the bit at the bottom?”

“Yes, I read that too. You say there, don’t you, that you’ve something particular to tell me? And——”

“So I have, b’Jove! and no mistake about it. Look here, Miss Brooke! I’m not much

good at talking, and that sort of thing ; but I say what I mean, and what I say I stick to. That's my form, you know ! Now if I'd got the gift of the gab like some fellows—like young Eliot, for instance,” added the speaker, glancing with sudden suspicion at the lady beside him, who, however, betrayed no overt emotion at the mention of the name.

“ Yes, Mr. Drummond ? ”

“ Well, you know, in that case I might spin no end of a yarn—talk till kingdom come, in fact. But that's not my sort. I'm rough, Miss Brooke—oh yes ! I'll own I'm rough—but then I'm ready, too.”

A pause. Miss Brooke cast down her eyes, trifled with her parasol, finally describing an irregular O with its point in the loose sandy soil at her feet.

“ I don't quite understand, Mr. Drummond,” said she, still looking down, and

designing another O—a worse one—enough to make Giotto turn in his grave !

“Not understand !” cried the young man, almost angrily. “Not understand ! Can’t you see I love you, Miss Brooke ? Don’t you know I’ve been mad about you ever since I saw you, and haven’t cared for a single blessed thing but yourself from that day to this ? O Lord, O Lord ! what a time I’ve had of it ! Hunting, shooting, dogs, horses, ratting, or rabbiting—it’s been all one to me ! I’ve lost taste for the lot. *You’re* what I’m thinking of, Miss Brooke, from morning till night, and if you won’t have me, why the devil must ! Will you have me, Miss Brooke ? Yes or no ? Will you or won’t you ?”

The earnestness of the speaker was past question, and there could not now be any further affectation of failing to catch his meaning. Miss Brooke felt that the moment for decision was come, and, indeed, her de-

cision had already been made ere it was demanded. What it might have been but for the pregnant piece of news that had so casually reached her a quarter of an hour previously, it would, perhaps, be presumptuous to inquire. The mind feminine is a delicately poised affair, and a very slight thing will incline it to one side or the other. Jack and Tom, haply, are weighed in the balance and found wanting, whereas Harry (a man of somewhat more substance, it is true) triumphantly turns the scale. So it has been from time immemorial, and so, we suppose, it will be as long as the sun goes its round, wherein (*absit omen!*) Virgo and Libra are everlastingly ranged together.

Miss Brooke, then, made such answer to her suitor's appeal as became a young person with a due appreciation of her own welfare—in other words, she accepted his offer, lifting him thereby into a seventh heaven of satis-

faction. Nor was this satisfaction barren of some sort of real good—some genuine and not unworthy outgrowth of humanity. So divine is love in its essence that, though it spring up amid the rankest weeds of worldly circumstance, it yet will struggle to the light and bear fair fruit. We can never wholly foretell the evil issues of our deeds: we cannot always see the good they will evoke. Lydia Brooke's selfish encouragement of her wooer had certain subtle, if transitory, influences on the moral nature of the man, of which she had not probably taken count. Just as the pure air of the mountain height will stimulate the physical energies to more active life, so the keen and novel atmosphere of a joy attained will quicken and expand the spiritual being. Ulric Drummond, for the time, was kindled with the generous impulses of a larger soul. Fortunate love is an enchanter that can ennoble the least noble. What but

Beauty's love transformed the Beast? and who shall determine the finer possibilities even of a Caliban—"deboshed fish" though he was!—had but Miranda smiled upon him?





CHAPTER XII.

GOSSIP AND GOSSIPS.

“**N**ORWICH,” said Mr. Oscar Dale, epigrammatically, “is a place where all the women are attractive, and all the men are—attracted! Let us go to Norwich, Eliot.”

Mr. Eliot drew from between his lips the amber mouthpiece of his meerschaum, puffed a ring of smoke into the roof of the verandah, beneath whose shade they were sitting, and lazily turned his head to the open window behind them.

“Alicia!”

“What is it, Charles?”

“Dale wants me to go to Norwich.”

Mrs. Eliot came forward from the inner gloom of the drawing-room to the threshold of the low French casement.

“Indeed, Mr. Dale, I only wish he *would* go to Norwich; there are so many things I stand in need of. That wool, you know, Charles, which you forgot on Tuesday! And then there’s the book Lady Muffle Drummond recommended us—‘Backsliding Britain’—and the tickets for the concert, and the wine you promised to taste for Cousin Sydney, and my watch at Mower’s! Pray, make him go, Mr. Dale; and get him to take you to my sister Deborah’s house in The Close: she’ll be charmed to see you, I’m sure.”

“Ah! just so,” said Mr. Eliot dubiously. “But I’m afraid, my dear, we shall scarcely have time to call on Deborah to-day. So many commissions, you see. Perhaps, on the whole, we’d better postpone our visit to The

Close until some other afternoon, when we shall have more leisure to talk to the o—only woman I ever do talk to in Norwich,” concluded Mr. Eliot, cleverly recovering himself on the brink of a precipice.

“Well, it’s as you like, of course; but really, Charles, it’s quite an age since you went to see Deborah last. However, if you make no call on her to-day, you’ll be able to get home to dinner. Mr. Dale, may I hope to see you back with my husband?” (Charles Eliot’s foot stole out and gently touched his friend’s.)

“You’re very kind, Mrs. Eliot, and I should be only too happy to return here if it were not my steward’s night at Idlewild. Once a week, you must know, I’m delivered over to the——well! let us be figurative, and say to the Foul Fiend. In other words, I’m called upon to undergo an ordeal known as ‘going through the accounts’ with Mr. Maccaboy,

my overseer. Maccaboy is a Scotchman; he's also a Beast—capital B., as Naomi Tighe, in *School*, calls Krux—and he won't let me off an item. At first I used to try to evade business detail and discussion by plunging blindly into any subject I thought likely to divert his attention—such as the fancied likeness of Edinburgh to Athens (stress on *fancied*); or the lyrical superiority of Béranger to Burns. But, dear, dear! it was all in vain! Of Athens he knew nothing; of Béranger, ditto; moreover, he complacently insinuated that no man born south of the Tweed had impartiality enough to form a 'joost aistimate o' the warks o' Rabbie Burns!' Thus sat upon, I fell an easy victim to the enemy."

"Ah, Mr. Dale! I fear you are not a man of business. Neither is Charles—not in the slightest—and yet, do you know, he has actually suffered himself to be made a director

of the East Anglian Bank, and goes over to Norwich every Tuesday—(or Thursday is it ?)—to sit at the Board there !”

“Where I speak as one having authority—a thing I cannot do at home—and get a guinea and a glass of sherry. *A propos*—if Draycott should call, Alicia, tell him I’m gone to taste the wine he talked of. I shall be back early, I dare say ; but you need not keep dinner for me after six.”

A bare half-hour’s walk from the market-place, on the leafy outskirts of the leafy city of Norwich, there stands a picturesque-looking old place, called The Coppice. It consists of a large house and small grounds ; a house with a cavernous, creeper-covered porch, and with three projecting peaks to the roof in front. A house, moreover, rich in diamond-paned, deep-silled windows, and surmounted by superfluous stacks of tall, twisted, Laocoon-like chimneys, whereon the starlings have

chirped and chattered and reared their dusky broods for the last century and a half.

Here—with an hereditary toleration of the starlings aforesaid ; an hereditary respect for the family name ; an hereditary taste for old wine and the works of old writers, and an acquired taste for his only daughter, Margaret—lived Ralph Oglevie, widower ; a man whose satirical tongue and overt cynicism were feared by his milder provincial neighbours, as the “cat” is feared by the modern rough, or as little Fitz-Caudle fears the woman who has vowed to love, honour, and obey him.

But the Diogenes of this, as of an elder day, is by no means a person ignored by society ; more especially when the tub he inhabits is of such dimensions as to embrace a dining-room, cellar, and stabling. And if, too, in addition to these desirable things, he be possessed of a daughter having her father's

brain without his brusqueness, his culture without his caustic temper ; then the name of Diogenes may fairly enough be included in one's visitors' list.

“ I like the Oglevies,” Charles Eliot would say, confidentially ; “ and whenever you find the mental palate cloyed with overmuch intercourse with everyday acquaintances, let me advise you, Dale, to seek them out. They give quite a fillip to one's intellectual appetite. Take 'em together—daughter and dad—sherry and bitters !”

With some such sentiment as this upon his lips it was that the master of The Leas, accompanied by Mr. Oscar Dale, found himself at the gates of The Coppice on the afternoon which brought them both to Norwich. The two gentlemen were not unfrequent visitors at the house of the Oglevies, although Mr. Dale's introduction to it was of much more recent date than his companion's. The

latter, indeed, was regarded almost in the light of an old friend, and was welcomed accordingly.

“Mr. Eliot,” exclaimed Margaret Oglevie, shaking hands with him as she spoke, “I’ve a bone to pick with you! A bone?—a set of bones! a perfect skeleton! Why didn’t you look in last week? And where, sir, are the bulbs you promised me?”

“The bulbs are in bed. They’ve a large one all to themselves in the back-garden. Alicia put them there yesterday, without knowing of my promise to you; and, as they were not yet up when I came away, I thought I wouldn’t disturb them. You shall have some others, however, from Petalli’s.”

“Thanks, in advance. But tell me—why didn’t you call last week?”

“Business, my dear Miss Oglevie, business! Board meeting, and so on. ‘I know a bank whereat my wild time goes!’ and hence, you see, my non-appearance.”

“ Oh, indeed ! Do you hear that, papa ? ”

“ I do ; and it’s satisfactory to feel that the financial interests of the community are attended to by Mr. Eliot, if by no one else. Young ladies like yourself, Margaret, can scarcely understand the commercial ardour of a man such as he. What the fashion-critique, say of *Le Follet*, is to you, the city article of the *Times* is to him ; and the zest which you have in a five o’clock tea he brings to a ten o’clock board. Do I state the case fairly Mr. Dale ? ”

“ Perfectly so, I should say ; Eliot’s what-you-may-call-it—*auri sacra fames*—is notorious. Everybody must have noticed how wholly he gives himself up to money and money-matters. Man delights him not, nor woman either—unless, indeed, it be the man or woman stamped on a coin.”

“ What a pity ! ” sighed Miss Oglevie.
“ And he used to be so nice ! ”

"I used !" murmured Charles Eliot, echoing the sigh.

Miss Oglevie smiled.

"Come, come ! Let us change the subject : it's grown personal and pathetic. Mr. Dale, I want your advice about my aquarium here. It needs restocking. Where can I get a score or so of small fish at a reasonable price ?"

"A score or so ?"

"Yes."

"And small ?"

"Yes."

"Buy a box of sardines."

"Absurd ! But, seriously, where do you think I can go for what I want ?"

"Come to Idlewild, Miss Oglevie. Mrs. Eliot will drive over with you some day, I've no doubt. We've a pond there that's a perfect museum of monstrosities. Eliot calls it the Tadpolar Sea. What he means I don't know ; but that doesn't matter. At all events,

I'll engage you get quite a miraculous draught of fishes, if you'll only try—and without toiling all night either."

"How delightful! And is it really such a happy hunting ground as you say? Newts, now—are there any newts?"

"Newts! Eliot, are there any newts?"

"Hundreds! Newts, toads, efts, owls, bats, beetles, and blind mice! The place is a regular witch's cauldron."

"Don't exaggerate! I shall ask Mrs. Eliot to take me to test it. Ponds always have a fascination for me; and so, too, have logs and stones that have been lying long undisturbed. To turn them over, and come suddenly upon all the queer, shut-away life beneath, is as exciting to me as the discovery of a new world is to an astronomer."

As Miss Oglevie finished speaking, the arrival of fresh visitors demanded her attention. These were Mrs. Towle, the wife of

the vicar in whose parish The Coppice stood ; her daughter, and a certain old-lady relative, widow of a local apothecary, whom death had mysteriously raised to the dignity of a physician. Sundry other visitors shortly afterwards appeared, for it was one of the days on which Miss Oglevie made a point of being at home, and hence her afternoon tea found a fair circle of consumers.

“Miss Oglevie,” said Mrs. Towle, in her sounding, self-confident voice, “I must secure you for our Girl’s Education Movement. The vicar has a meeting on Monday evening, seven o’clock, at the old schoolroom. I’m for plain sewing and Holy Writ ; and if they *will* have anything more—geography. You can’t better that, I think ?”

“Someone was saying that to teach sewing nowadays is a waste of time and energy,” said Margaret. “I believe it was Mr. McLoman. He maintains that machinery

will soon supersede hand-work entirely—that we shall be all forks and no fingers.”

“Dear! that ‘economy of labour!’ ” broke in Mr. Eliot. “How weary one gets hearing of it, and how persistently its advocates will drag it in where it’s out of place!”

“Quite so, Eliot, quite so,” quoth Mr. Oglevie, smartly rapping his snuffbox. “Your husband will wake up some fine morning, Mrs. Towle, and find his occupation gone; for I suspect we shall be having a soul-saving apparatus next, of ‘40-parson power,’ as Sydney Smith puts it.”

In Mrs. Towle there was about as much sense of humour as there is succulency in a cinder; and she answered with some degree of asperity :

“Mr. Towle’s work, Mr. Oglevie, is not to be classed with ordinary occupations. What mere mechanical agency, pray, can interfere with functions such as his?”

“Ah! what indeed?” sighed the elderly relative, wagging her widowed head remonstratingly at Mr. Oglevie. “Those who labour in the Lord’s vineyard are not to be set aside by steam-ploughs, let people say what they will. And as for me, my dear” (drifting off confidentially to a young lady at her side), “I can’t do with machine-made things at all! I’m sure the way in which that last gown of mine from Martin’s came unstitched was most disheartening. Right down the seam, you know!”

“How very shameful!” said the young person, sympathetically; and presently a small assembly of heads feminine was gathered together in the absorbing discussion of milliners’ deeds and misdeeds, whereby Mr. Oscar Dale, who happened to be seated at an adjacent table, idly turning the leaves of an album, acquired certain scraps of information more mysterious than edifying. For instance,

overhearing it whispered that Miss Towle's black alpaca had positively been "brought home the other night *pipéd with white*," it was to him as though one should say "drunk with wine," and henceforward he felt inclined to look upon the dress in question as a disgrace to the society in which it moved.

Miss Oglevie, noticing Dale's isolation, took occasion to detach herself for awhile from the group of ladies with whom she had been in converse, and moved to the table whereat he sat. From time to time it chanced that she had exchanged with him opinions on literature, new and old, and each had found the other versed in books to a wider extent than had been anticipated. Both were great readers, catholic in their tastes, liberal in their views. Margaret Oglevie, undoubtedly, was the more earnest and single-minded, the purer student of the two; but Dale had that precious natural love of letters which opens

to its possessor such abiding fellowship with noble minds and gentle hearts as may become the very salt of life. Save to a few, however, he was not wont to make manifest how real was his interest in authors and their works, and only these few knew the genuine thought and culture that underlay the assumed superficiality and indifferentism of his ordinary tone. Oscar Dale was certainly "odd" in many ways. He had a queer relish for giving people false impressions of his character, and often seemed as willing to be misunderstood as others are anxious to avoid it.

Of Margaret Oglevie — "rare pale Margaret," as Charles Eliot would call her—we shall have much to say in the after-course of our story; but haply a word or two of introduction now may not be misplaced. And in mentioning Margaret, we are tempted to put down our pen and give way to private meditation. The thought of her comes back

like a strain of music. In fancy she rises up before us, with her clear, kind eyes—wont to meet one's own with such frank interrogation or appeal!—her outstretched hand, the clasp of which was more eloquent than another woman's kiss; her gently flowing garments (soft harmonies of grey, white, and black, making simplicity a grace, and ever pleasantly recalling the old line, "My love in her attire doth show her wit"); her happy gift of humour, and her keen, sympathetic recognition of every "best" in art, or Nature, or humanity! Characters akin to Margaret Oglevie's are not many in this world (whatever they may be in a more habitable one), but such few as there are among us—women large of heart and brain, full of pure thought and generous impulse—have a power to stir the souls of men to good beyond that of all the priests in Christendom.

We have spoken of Mr. Oglevie as a

widower. His wife died whilst Margaret was yet a mere child; hence her education had been somewhat exceptional. From the first moment that she could read, her father's library had been open to her, and hour after hour would be spent by the grave dreamy-eyed little girl on an upper step of the library ladder, where, in cramped and precarious attitudes, she would be found absorbed over ponderous volumes, which the servants who came to seek her sweepingly "dratted" as "rubbidge," and which, to the bulk of contemporary childhood had probably only been palatable as material for building them houses. Books, thus, had been her earliest and closest companions, wherefore the names and writings of many a long-gone labourer at the "quaint trade," became as familiar in her mouth as household words. And this provoked criticism.

"Mr. Oglevie," Mrs. Towle had exclaimed,

emphatically, as spokeswoman of the outraged female mind of the neighbourhood, "that Maggie of yours ought to be looked after! The way she's suffered to waste her precious time in idle and profane reading is most—you'll excuse my saying so, but it's really most deplorable. I've a daughter of my own, Mr. Oglevie, and I know what's good for her, and what isn't."

"Just my case, Mrs. Towle."

"Look at these," continued the vicar's wife, turning to a pile of old poets and dramatists which Margaret had that morning brought together for special study. "What do you call these, pray?"

"Elizabethans mostly, I believe," answered the widower, eying them grimly, with the air of an old acquaintance.

"Elizabethans, indeed! Ah, well! at *her* age I do think one might have looked for better things; and I can only say, Mr.

Oglevie, that it wasn't such works as these I used to read when *I* was a young girl!"

"No, ma'am; I imagine not."

"What's to come of it all," continued the lady, pointing the parasol of scorn at the objectionable volumes, "is more than I can tell! Paley was given us to read in *my* days, Mr. Oglevie—to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest; and Pollock's 'Course of Time,' and Blair, and Young; but as for your Marleys and Cowlowes——"

"Marlowes and Cowleys, madam."

"—— and Draytons and Drummonds; why, we never so much as heard of them!"

This little dialogue, and sundry similar ones, occurred when the unconscious subject of discussion was some fifteen years old. Ralph Oglevie (supported by his snuff-box) heard the well-meant expostulation to its end with a fair outward show of patience; but the course of Margaret's studies was by

no means altered in consequence. The customary governesses and tutors were duly provided her, but her real education was that which she procured herself.

At the time the reader meets her she had just passed her nineteenth birthday, having recently returned from a three months' wandering over the Continent, whither she had gone with her father. She was a tall slim, grey-eyed girl, with a certain sweet self-possession and tact about her which made people quite lose sight of the fact of her youthfulness.

"She might be any age to hear her talk!" quoth local young ladyhood, somewhat snappishly; for Margaret was not altogether popular with her junior neighbours, being too unconventionally free from prudery on the one side, and from coquetry on the other, to satisfy the representatives of either.

But to return. We are forgetting our company.

“Are you looking at my album, Mr. Dale?” said Miss Oglevie, as she approached him, “or have you been listening to Mrs. Towle on milliners? Isn’t it sad?”

“Awful! The everlasting unfitness of things, as shown by Miss Bayley’s blue serge and Mrs. Cundy’s grey tweed, is simply appalling!”

“Do they trouble you very grievously, Mr. Dale—the blue serge and grey tweed?”

“Well, no! Frankly, not very. Or rather, not at all. Indeed, for the matter of that, I might quote your Browning, and own, ‘I’d as lief that the blue were grey.’”

“For shame! I didn’t think you’d misapply a beautiful line in that way. Don’t you like ‘A Lover’s Quarrel?’”

“‘A Lover’s Quarrel’—meaning the poem?”

“Of course.”

“Yes. It winds up, though, as all lovers’

quarrels do. *Amantum iræ*, you know
——.”

“Go on, Mr. Dale.”

“*Amoris integratio est*; which is to say, that if your true love slaps you on the one cheek, you must turn her the other, and she’ll kiss it.”

“Isn’t that a good deal for so few words to mean?” asked Margaret, humorously paraphrasing to herself Alice’s query to Humpty-Dumpty, from “Through the Looking-Glass.”

But Dale recognised the quotation, and promptly took it up.

“When *I* use a phrase,” said he, assuming Humpty-Dumpty’s tone of scorn, “I make it mean just what I choose, *I* do—neither more nor less!”

They both smiled here, but Miss Towle, who had regarded the *tête-à-tête* with a spirit of growing impatience, and who had overlooked

the latter sentences, mentally commented as follows :

“ Well, people call Maggie Oglevie so wonderfully clever and all that, but if they had heard how Mr. Dale snubbed her about that Latin, they might alter their opinion, perhaps. It served her just right. She fancies she knows everything !” *Etcetera, etcetera.*

Whence it got whispered abroad next day that Miss Oglevie had actually attempted to correct Mr. Dale, of Idlewild, in a quotation from Pliny the Elder—(thus such as loved accuracy ; besides, by introducing the name of Pliny the Elder there was added to poor Margaret’s original offence a vague contingent suggestion of disrespect to age), and that Mr. Dale thereupon had as good as told her she didn’t understand what she was talking about ! Or, in the servant-maid’s version (for, of course, there was that, as well as one for

drawing-room circulation), "he ups and tells her that if she fancied she knew Latting better than what he did, she was much mistaken, and so she needn't deceive herself!"

All this, however, by the way. For the time being, Miss Towle had but little leisure to reflect on the sage conclusion to which her charity had led her, for her thoughts, as those of everyone with her, were unexpectedly diverted by a piece of intelligence which promised food for scandal of a most piquant nature.

The Rev. Paul Boddyman, Rector of Hethercote, was announced in the drawing-room of The Coppice ; and with him he brought this news :

"Miss Brooke, the governess at Draycott Manor, had eloped with Ulric Muffle Drummond !!!"

The ascertained particulars were briefly as follows :

Early in the week prior to the rector's announcement, young Drummond had betaken him to town with the alleged purpose of attending a sale at Tattersall's. In London he had been met by Miss Brooke, who, it appeared, had assigned to her employer the illness of a near relative as an excuse for an indefinite leave of absence.

The lady and gentleman had been married by special licence, and had then returned to Norwich. Here young Drummond would seem to have hired, in advance, a small house for his wife's reception, he himself going home to the paternal mansion. A week had elapsed without discovery or confession, but at the close of this interval, either by accident or design, the whole matter was revealed.

A tremendous scene had ensued. Lady Drummond, and at least one of her daughters, had gone off into hysterics (thus

evincing a proper feminine sense of meeting an emergency) ; old Sir Hugo had taken to his bed ; whilst his infatuated son had straightway quitted the Hall, and was now living, with the womam he had wedded, in Norwich.

Some two hours or so after the reception of the foregoing news, Charles Eliot and Oscar Dale were about seating themselves at dinner in a private room at the Regent Hotel. The former gentleman had decided that it was too late to return home to dine, and hence the meal *en garçon* at Norwich, which, to tell the truth, was not altogether unpremeditated on the part of Mrs. Eliot's husband.

“ As you observed (or was it Mrs. Towle ?), it's a queer go—this elopement,” said Mr. Dale taking his seat at table.

“ So runs the world away,” murmured Mr. Eliot, unfolding his napkin. “ I always

thought that woman would make a fool of some one."

"Well! she's not chosen her raw material badly. Natural selection, I suppose. It's a pretty good pick-up, too, for her, by Jove! Drummond's of age, isn't he?"

"Just, I believe."

"And that unfortunate brother of his can't last?"

"No."

"Nor the old gentleman either, much longer. Why, Eliot, she'll be My Lady before the year's out!"

"Shouldn't wonder. Think she and her mother-in-law will cotton?"

"Of course! Like the rival bulls in Virgil. I'd give something really nice to see them encounter."

"She's a deuced handsome woman."

"Mrs. Ulric?"

“ Yes. I’m glad, though, Draycott didn’t take her to wife.”

“ Draycott ! ’Twasn’t possible, surely ?”

“ Quite possible, my dear Dale. Indeed, I rather suspect it was a narrow escape for us. You don’t know what a consummate egotist that man is ! Family considerations would have no weight whatever with him, if it were a question of gratifying his personal inclination. He’ll be marrying his cook some day, confound him !”

“ *A propos* of family considerations ; did it ever strike you that your Dick had got smitten with Miss Brooke ‘ as was ’ ?”

“ Dick’s an ass !”

“ You’re partial.”

“ Not at all. Did Dick ever talk to you about her, then ?”

“ Oh dear, no ! But I think the young gentleman was hit, all the same.”

“ Well, well ! It was merely a boy’s

fancy, I suppose. Most likely he has forgotten all about her by this time. *On ne revient jamais à la première aimée*; and, as a rule, Dale, it's better to have loved and lost, than loved and married. He'll be coming home, you know, at the beginning of the month, and then he can call and congratulate her."

And, with this, the subject passed.





CHAPTER XIII.

“OH, DOTH NOT A MEETING LIKE THIS MAKE
AMENDS !”



TRINITY term was over, and the long vacation begun. Oxford was empty, her halls deserted, and the old city seemed older still by reason of all the young life gone from out her gates. Through shade and shine of the deep-hearted summer days Alma Mater dozed peacefully and profoundly, the while her truant children (spirited away, at Pleasure's call, as completely as Hamelin's youngsters by the Pied Piper) made holiday throughout the land. Ah, those three golden months of leisure and liberty, of sport and pastime, of

reading and romance, of fond dreaming and Arcadian afternoons! What delight of summer sweethearting was ours then! What bliss of long vacation loves,

“Born when the cuckoo changes tune,
Dead ere the apple’s red is on it!”

We met Jones in Cheapside yesterday—Jones, the *fidus Achates* of our early years—and we thought tenderly of the time when we were boys (that is, Oxford men) together. Jones was high-hatted and stiff-collared, alien to the Jones, that prodigal of passion! who so wildly adored the market-gardener’s daughter in the days gone by. *Tempora mutantur!* Could we lean our head upon his shirt-front (one of six, at 42s. the half-dozen) and express the yearning that we felt? Hardly! And had we done so, would our yearning have found response? “Narra’ yearn!” as the Americans say. We ourselves are still the ever young, fresh, loved,

and delicate wooer of yore. But Jones ? Jones is "something in the City."

Dick Eliot was on his way home. And this same home-coming after a first absence from the parental roof (even though it may have been one of a few months only) is a momentous matter enough to the ordinary youngster. For he has been out into the world, has mingled with men, and has learnt many and strange things. The spoils he has gathered are manifold, and all his novel acquirements will be duly displayed before the envious eyes of the less fortunate youth of his neighbourhood. From the cut of his garments to the growth of his vocabulary, from the purchase of razors to his open traffic in tobacco—every such point will be made and scored in his favour. His return, indeed, will be replete with small triumphs over local stay-at-homes ; for when, my dear madam, did stationary merit excite the interest shown in a wanderer ? A fixed star

is well enough in its way, but which of you will go slip out at eve to see it, as you will the occasional and unaccustomed comet ?

Our hero, leaning back in the padded carriage which bore him eastward from London, was in an eager, agitated, but not unpleasant frame of mind, and his brain was busy with the thought of coming meetings, of coming conversations (which he had mentally rehearsed a hundred times), of coming pleasures and exploits. Above all, he should see his Lydia once again !

“Oh, Lydia, Lydia !” murmured the lad, tremulously” (he was alone in his compartment), “how I love, how I long for you !” And then he began to repeat aloud some of the many glowing verses which he had recently written in her praise, breaking off suddenly to press his lips against the chance periodical in his hand (the current number of *Punch*) by way of outlet to the superfluous fervour of his

feelings. (*Nemo mortalium*, etc., and most of us, probably, have played such fantastic tricks before high heaven in our salad days or since.)

A familiar proverb, the general truth of which may, perhaps, be open to dispute, asserts that the effect of absence is to make the heart grow fonder. Dick Eliot's heart, at all events, had grown very fond indeed. An ardent, unchecked imagination had found abundant food in retrospect during the dozen or so weeks he had passed at Oxford, and ever and anon it had been stimulated by the letters with which Miss Brooke had favoured her boy-lover. The last of these precious epistles, it is true, was a full month old ; but, although this had caused him certain moments of jealous misgiving and impatience, he now looked confidently forward to the near meeting with his mistress to clear away all clouds, and to let shine once more the unchequered sunlight of love.

How often since they parted had he dreamt of this meeting, whereof the threshold at length was gained! In warm May evenings, as he drifted down stream with idle oars, and saw the madcap midges, heralds of heat, a-quiver above the towing-path; through the odorous darkness of June nights; in the loitering noontides, drowsy with bees; in class-room and chapel; and even amid the bacchanalian Babel of college "wines," when, through the eddying smoke-mist of flushed faces there would rise up a vision of his lady's ripe brunette beauty—

"On her neck the small face buoyant,
Like a bell-flower on its bed,
O'er the breast's superb abundance,
Where a man might base his head."

Dick had left London by a late afternoon train (having spent the previous night in town with fellow-collegians), and he was not due at Norwich until past ten. Arrived

here, his intention was to stop at the Regent until the following morning, when he could proceed to Hethercote at as early an hour as might be most convenient. To have continued his journey without thus breaking it would have necessitated the hire of some private conveyance; and, since his return was not looked for until the morrow, this seemed scarcely worth the while.

By what of late has come to be considered a railway accident—namely, the arriving safely at one's terminus—our hero found himself in Norwich, *sain et sauf*, shortly after ten o'clock. The night was hot and breathless; a night when warm-blooded animals, such as young men and maids, appeared unwilling to betake them to their beds, rather preferring to linger outdoors in the dusk with bat, and moth, and other twilight-loving things. Along the riverside, and even on the river itself, people were thus

lingering as Dick Eliot's cab crossed the bridge that spanned its dark waters. A subdued murmur of voices, broken now and again by a snatch of song or the light laugh of a girl, floated upward through the sultry air, wandering lazily by until the sound was lost, and only the fragrance of the lindens remained. In the city everything was unwontedly quiet. Norwich is given up to gardens, both within and without her gates, and the good folk were mostly enjoying themselves, after a tranquil fashion, amid their beloved bowers and privet-hedges, the elders placidly discussing trade and weather prospects, whilst their juniors strolled about the dim, scented paths, and talked the idle talk of youth.

Unable, in the over-active state of his nerves, to rest in his hotel, Dick Eliot had no sooner made the requisite arrangements for the night, than he issued forth once more,

sauntering leisurely through the deserted streets, hands in pockets and cigar in mouth. Presently he came to the brilliantly lit swing-doors of a public bar, and herein, impatient of the brooding outer quiet, he entered. The proprietor of the place, a bulky, red-faced man, coatless and collarless, was serving a soldier and two women with a compound of gin-and-beer ("dog-nose") at one end of the counter; whilst a showily attired barmaid awaited custom at the other. To her Dick addressed himself.

"Some soda-and-brandy, please."

"Soda-and-brandy? Yes, sir. Very 'ot this evening!"

"Very."

"Pleasant outside, though, I dare say."

"Yes."

"A-many people walking, no doubt; and I don't blame 'em neither. I s'pose *you've* been taking your stroll round, sir?"

“No ; I’ve just come in by train.”

“Oh, indeed ! Been beautiful by the sea, to-day, I should think ?”

“Eh ? I’ve not come from Yarmouth—from London. Oxford yesterday.”

“Ah, I thought you was a stranger. We had an Oxford gentleman here last week. He comes in (as it might be you), and the way he carried on was most awful ! ‘Miss Mingay,’ he says ; (and how he ever found out my name, goodness only can tell !) ‘Miss Mingay, I adore you ! If you know what a clime is—a far-off clime,’ he says, ‘and where there’s one handy, we’ll fly to it !’ I told him plainly to his face that he wouldn’t get any flying or climbing out of *me*, and so he needn’t expect it. Then he wanted to know if I was engaged to any one else. Did you ever ! The idear !”

Dick, in the fulness of his heart, had all day been feeling a persistent craving for

some sort of companionship, some human sympathy, some fellow-creature to whom he could hint, however vaguely, the emotional crisis at which he had arrived; and now it seemed that an opportunity had come to him. The barmaid was not a lady, it is true; but then she was a woman, youthful, kindly, and well-favoured. No further intruders had appeared in the place, and the soldier and his companions were wholly given over to their "dog-nose." Dick drank some of his soda-and-brandy, leant his arms upon the counter, and began to speak.

"He asked if you were engaged, did he?"

"Yes, that he did!"

"And what did you answer?"

"I said 'That's telling!'"

"I beg pardon?"

"I said, 'That's telling!'"

"I see," said Dick, slowly withdrawing his arms from the counter, and applying himself

anew to his refreshment. Then, after a slight hesitation, he resumed his original posture.

“Would you take *me* to be engaged?”

The girl paused midway in pouring some fresh water into a jug, looked quickly round at him, and smiled.

“Are you, really?”

Dick nodded.

“You’re very young, ain’t you?”

“I’m eighteen—pretty nearly.”

“And I’m twenty. Two years the better of you—or the worse.” Here she sighed.

It is a fact that there is no fool like an old fool; but, on the other hand, it is equally true that there is none like a young one. The folly of age has the advantage of such experience as may have failed to make a given fool wise; but then, in point of capital unwasted by the expenditure of years, the folly of youth finds compensation. It were

doubtless irrational of our hero to be in love at all; but that he should have ever told his love—should publish it gratuitously, seriously, as a thing to be proud of—argues an unwisdom at which we sage seniors may fairly lose patience. A woman, however, will always listen to a love-story, and age cannot wither, nor custom stale, her interest in the recital. Dick Eliot did not, perhaps, reveal the history of his young affections without reservation, definitely and directly, but he let fall such sufficiency of fragmentary detail as enabled his sympathetic auditor to piece together what, to her mind, was a romance of especial interest. For she too could echo the poet's cry :

*"Ich habe genossen das irdische gluck,
Ich habe gelebt und geliebet !"*

And a fellow-felling made her wondrous kind. Wherefore it befell that Dick in turn became recipient of manifold hintings and half-veiled

confessions anent a certain shadowy young tobacconist, of fascinating person, but alas ! dubious fidelity ; and presently he found himself dealing out across the counter consoling generalities as to ultimate constancy and the like, for the benefit of the desponding damsel, who (with unconscious significance) was abstractedly turning on the taps of the ardent spirits she had charge of.

If it be true that when fools meet the devil goes to dinner, then at least the Evil One had fair opportunity of breaking fast on occasion of the interview we have just recorded, supposing humanity not to have given him excuse for dining earlier in the day. Dick Eliot, strong in the assurance of his own heart-happiness, was moved to compassion at the suggestion of the untoward course of another's love. Being so blissfully endowed, he could well be generous ; and, in taking leave of the forlorn barmaiden, he

extended her his hand in token of the sympathy he felt. Nor could he but be conscious of a certain self-complacency in contrasting his own gracious fortune with the ill chance of the young person he was quitting.

Twelve! The strokes of midnight were travelling slowly over the City housetops as our hero reappeared in the street, warning the late abroad to hie them to their homes, speeding the parting guest, and cutting short the lengthened sweetness of lovers' last good-nights. Dick was perversely indisposed for bed, and rather chose to prolong his stroll in company of the rabble of fond fancies that were singing through his brain.

But there was other and more audible singing going on in the neighbourhood at this moment; singing of a very earthly and material sort, somewhat akin, indeed, to Stephano's drunken strains when first we meet him on the enchanted isle. For this,

too, was the voice of a toper, and of one, moreover, far advanced in liquor. Dick listened. The song was sentimental — an ominous sign! — and not convivial; it seemed, too, mainly consisting of chorus.

“Goo’-bye, sweetheart, go-o-od-bye!” sang, or rather shouted, the voice; and presently round the corner came the singer himself.

Reeling in his gait, with glazed eyes and disordered dress, the man made his way toward the spot where Dick Eliot had just paused, looking neither to right nor left, but blundering stupidly forward after the incompetent fashion of the owl at noon. And still he sang:

“Goo’-bye, sweetheart, go-o-od-bye!” until, with a lurch and a hiccough, he staggered almost into his auditor’s arms.

“Goo’-bye, sweet—hullo, gov’ner! where ye driving to?”

The light of a near lamp fell upon his

face, and Dick started back in astonishment. It was Ulric Drummond !

“ Drummond ! ”

“ Hay ! Tha’s my na——What ! Eliot ! S’help me, here’s Eliot ! How are ye, Eliot ? A’right ? Eliot, my boy, I’m drunk—as a wheelb-rer, old pal—and no mistake about it ! Wasaclock ? ”

“ Where in the world have you been, Drummond ? ”

“ Been ? Been out, o’course ! Where should I been, hey ? Been to supper—crick’t club. Wasaclock ? ”

“ But I say, Drummond ! Where are you off to now ? To the Regent ? ”

“ Regent be hanged ! I’m going home, I am. ‘Goo’-bye, sweetheart, go-o-od-bye ! Come ’long, Eliot ; lesgo’home ! ”

“ Nonsense, Drummond ! We can’t get to Hethercote to-night. Better by half come to the Regent with me. Will you ? ”

“D—— the Regent, I say! Don’t I keep telling you I live here now? I’m gonome—t’my wife, b’Jove! Married man, you know, an’ that sorrerthing. Wasaclock?”

“Here! hold up, Drummond! Take my arm, and then I’ll see you wherever you like. I wish to Heaven there was a cab about!”

“Cab be blowed! Not ten min’t’s walk, I tell you. Come ’long, Eliot, an’ we’ll have a quiet glass o’ grog together at home. Glassagrog an’ a song, b’Jove! ‘Goo’-bye, sweetheart, go-o-od-bye!’ Talk t’ my wife, too—old fren’, you know, an’ all that, hey!”

To this tipsy, half-intelligible maundering Dick paid but little heed. His attention was chiefly engrossed in aiding his companion in preserving his balance, and in giving a definite direction to his steps. He felt no small disgust at the society in which he found himself, but Drummond’s condition was such that he could not well abandon him until

he was safely housed. And, muddled as the man was, he had evidently some haven or other in view toward which he was disposed to steer : hence our hero deemed it advisable to let him have his way so far as was compatible with a due observance of the perpendicular. Stumbling alike in speech and motion, Ulric Drummond pursued his course, supported by Dick Eliot, from the market-place into Theatre Street, and so on toward the species of square beyond known as Chapel Field.

“ Nearly home, now, old cock ! And, I say, Eliot ! do I look screw’d, hey ? Nev’ mind ! No matter ! *You* talk t’ Mrs. D., you know, an’ it’ll be a’right. Reg’lar lark, hey ? ”

“ Who’s Mrs. D. ? Landlady ! ”

“ ‘Course she’s a lady ! What d’ye mean ? ”

“ Oh, all right, all right ! Which is the house—this ? Where’s your key ! ”

After some delay in searching, the latch-key was produced, and, softly ascending the steps, Dick applied it to the door.

“Steady, Drummond! Mind how you come! Can you find your way in alone, do you think, or shall I go with you?”

“A’right! Come in, old boy, come in! Don’t be afraid—we’re all alone, me an’ the missis, you know.”

Dick’s thoughts reverted anew to a probable landlady, and he hesitated. Under the circumstances, he had no inclination to encounter a stranger, and it was only on considering the expedience of seeing his incapable companion fairly disposed of for the night, that he decided to run the risk. Gently opening the door, therefore, he admitted Drummond into the dark hall-passage, taking care to follow closely at his heels. All was silent throughout the house, the atmosphere of which had a musty suggestion

of stair-carpet and wearing apparel, and seemed close and oppressive to one coming from without. The sole thing hinting at any wakeful human presence was a narrow gleam of light from a door on the left ; and toward this light Drummond, with Dick behind him, groped his way. A few short steps brought them to the threshold of the chamber from whence it proceeded.

At a first glance the room appeared to Dick to be untenanted, but almost immediately after he became aware of the figure of a woman reclining in a low chair at the further end of the apartment, and apparently asleep. At this moment Drummond stumbled against a small footstool, knocking it noisily over, and abruptly arousing the sleeper.

“A’right, my dear ; it’s a’right ! Brought an old fren’ t’see you. Rec’lect Eliot, hey ?”

The woman rose suddenly to her feet, and at the same instant our hero started forward,

with flushed face and bewildered stare, into the full light of the lamp.

“*Lydia!*”

“Hay?” said Drummond, looking from one to the other with a tipsy air of inquiry. “Wasamatter? My wife, Eliot.”

“Your *wife*? Oh, it’s a lie, a LIE!” burst out Dick, passionately, the colour fading from his cheeks and leaving him white and trembling. “*Lydia, speak!* What does it mean, what does it mean? It *can’t* be true.”

Lydia Drummond faltered. She had not been prepared for such an encounter as this: it was awkward and disconcerting to a degree. In anticipating a possible meeting and explanation with Dick Eliot, she had presupposed a host of minor incidents; a succession of favourable preliminaries, to smoothen and palliate the fact of her marriage. At least he would have heard all about it before they came again together—would have got over

the first shock—and probably a letter or two might have passed between them. But to be brought thus face to face, without word or warning, and with no available plea or sophistry to interpose between herself and the bare truth, was distracting, provoking beyond all things! If only she could gain time, could get a hearing! For a moment she looked at the two young men before her—at the coarse, drink-inflamed face of the one, at the pale and haggard features of the other—and then she spoke.

“Mr. Eliot!—I thought you knew? I thought——”

“It’s—it’s true, then?” broke in Dick, fiercely, speaking in strange, harsh accents, and gazing at her with wild eyes. “You’ve——married!”

“’Course she has! What d’ye mean? Sit down an’ le’sdrinkerelth, old boy! I say sit——”

“Leave hold ! Let me go !”

“Sit dow——”

“Let me go !” cried Dick, with suppressed fury. Then suddenly, as the other still held him by the arm, his rage, grief, and bitter disappointment broke loose like a torrent, and his voice rose to a shriek. “Curse you !” he screamed. “You fool, you *fool* ; let go !” And, with a wrench, he sent Drummond staggering violently from him, and rushed blindly out into the darkness.

It was bright morning when Dick Eliot returned to the Regent, a dusty, dishevelled youngster, with face pale, worn, and altered. How and where he had spent the intervening hours he was never quite able to recall. All the night through he would seem to have wandered to and fro like an unquiet spirit, seeking rest and finding none. He remembered being by the river-side, and also lying down on a bench by some boathouse, watching

the dark monotonous flow of the water, and hearing it lapping against the bank as it passed. He recollected, too, that a barge went by as he lay there; that a dog barked at him from it, and that a man's voice swore at the animal angrily. He felt dazed and stupefied, and an endless iteration of Drummond's tipsy chorus, "Good-bye, sweetheart!" went on in his brain with dreary persistence, like the dull ticking of a clock or the muffled ring of bells. At earliest dawn the birds began to pipe and whistle around him, and soon people were moving abroad to their day's labour. He was conscious that he attracted attention as he pursued his aimless way; but this he scarcely heeded, until at last a young, bright-looking woman stopped to ask if he were ill, when the tears rose hotly to his eyes, and he turned hurriedly away to seek shelter from observance.

The respectable, bald-headed waiter, who remarked our hero's re-entrance into the Regent, wrinkled his brow meditatively at the appearance he presented, methodically charging it to the errors and excesses of youth, as though putting down a recognised item to a customer's account. "Hah! just so! Mixed drinks and hate'n penny loo; two trumps, lead the 'ighest; hafter trick a trump. *I* know, bless yer!" And he concluded to call the young gentleman, sleeping in No. 5, at some late hour in the afternoon, having an extra strong cup of tea in readiness for him in the coffee-room.

Reaching the chamber allotted him, Dick flung himself down, all dressed as he was, upon the bed, utterly wretched and exhausted, his limbs aching, his head throbbing, his heart burning. Hours went by, and still he lay there, thinking, thinking, yet striving and battling all the while against

thought, recoiling from it, and turning to a dozen different objects in order to postpone the full realisation of what at present seemed but as a brooding cloud and heaviness upon his brain. He heard the city clocks noising abroad their chimes at midday, and an interval of weeks almost appeared to him to have elapsed since last he had listened to the strokes of twelve from these same church-towers. By-and-by he rose from the bed, and looked about him confusedly for water. It was not very fresh or cool when found ; but he felt parched and feverish, and swallowed it eagerly. Turning toward the bed again, his eyes caught the reflection of his face in the glass above the mantelshelf. Its ghostly, woe-begone aspect drew him to closer inspection, and a rush of youthful self-pity surged up from his heart as he looked. With a sudden access of despair, he clasped his hands passionately across his brow, sink-

ing down on his knees upon the hearth-rug.

“Oh, my God, help me! Lydia, Lydia! Come back, Lydia! come——”

Silence reigned in No. 5. The slanting rays of a July sun poured in at the window of the hot little back chamber, throwing irregular patches of fierce light about the stuffy red-and-green drugget. A curious stillness was in the room, and in the narrow stable-yard it overlooked. That kind of “gritty calm and bake,” of which Mrs. Lirriper speaks, had settled down upon the breathless neighbourhood, and only the melancholy sound of a distant barrel-organ came at intervals over the housetops. From some lower apartment of the hotel arose a drowsy hum of voices, a faint occasional jingle of glasses and plates; but otherwise the whole house seemed asleep. The flies buzzed

about the window-panes, the bland portraits of two buried nobodies gazed with inflexible smiles from the chamber walls, whilst the cut paper in the grate, white and saw-toothed, grinned through the cold black bars like a skeleton.





CHAPTER XIV.

CONVALESCENCE.

IT is an awkward moment (as we, who have 'experienced it can testify) when first one finds out that one's idol is made of mere clay, like other people's, and sees the thing one has worshipped and believed in lying shattered at one's feet. All too well do we remember the day that this discovery came home to us—or, stay! it was we who came home to the discovery. Only, you see, we were fond and foolish, and so stooped (O! purblindness of puppyhood!) to pick up the pieces, and sought—aye! actually sought to put Humpty-

Dumpty together again. *Eh bien !* We are wiser now, and, when our fetish falls (as fall it must !), we go and get a new one, as the philosopher mentioned by Horace Walpole was wont, on losing his friend, to call at the St. James's Coffee House and take another.

But, alas ! our youthful hero could not thus console himself with "adversity's sweet milk, philosophy"—which has, indeed, at no time been milk for babes, but rather the artificial nourishment of second childhood. For Dick had loved, like the many, not wisely, but like the few, too well ; and it must be admitted that his young affections were somewhat rudely nipped in the bud. That they had been grievously misplaced is undeniable ; but, unfortunately (as Byron reminds us), human love is not the growth of human will, and the natural selection of the heart, in its unscientific search for a mate,

tends to no Darwinian sequence in a Survival of the Fittest. It is, therefore, perhaps, hardly to be wondered that Dick Eliot should have bestowed himself as our history has recorded. The time was ripe for some such bestowal when Miss Brooke appeared; having appeared, the result was a matter of course. The woman tempted him, and he did eat; and if, by-and-by, the fruit disagreed with him (as fruit so often does disagree with folk), it affords us a wholesome warning against the rash indulgence of appetite.

We have said that, though Dick did not love wisely, he loved well. And this is true. His passion for Lydia Brooke was wholly genuine, his fancy fairly captivated. A thousand nameless nothings had conspired to bring this consummation to pass, each tending to entangle him more deplorably. The tie of a ribbon, the accent of a word, a touch of the hand, a turn of the head—bah!

who can catalogue the causes of one's likes or dislikes? We, ourselves, remember once being desperately smitten with a certain spinster lady, Miss Coûte-que-Coutts, the wealthy West Indian orphan. She wasn't pretty, or clever, or accomplished, or, indeed, obviously attractive in any way; but there were we, following her here, there, and everywhere, as though she were a very Venus! Of course there must have been *some* charm about her—but what? We give our word as a gentleman that we never could understand our infatuation about the woman, nor the manner in which our sainted mother was wont to encourage it. Love is blind, you know; and if this unprotected young female had faults, we failed to perceive them. To us she was the one object of existence—until she married another—and then we saw what an object she was!

But to return to our hero. For a fort-

night he lay at the Regent, whither his father and mother had been summoned by mine host with all due promptness. So severe was the mental shock he had encountered, so sharp and sudden the strain, that it proved sufficient to upset the balance of his brain. During the ten days or so that his reason suffered more or less eclipse, he naturally talked a vast amount of nonsense. Snatches of poetry (original and select) were intermingled with fleeting allusions to past escapades at Oxford, pathetic reminiscences of school-days and childhood, of boyish wrongs endured, of dim woes and misunderstandings. The injury, the injustice we meet with as children (be it real or imaginary), is never wholly forgotten, seldom wholly forgiven; and amid all the trials and afflictions of later life, the memory of our first tangible grievance remains, the sense of its ancient bitterness re-awakens. And the ghosts of these early

evils will haunt us when more recent and much more serious vexations are resting quietly in their graves.

As soon as he could safely be moved, Dick was taken home to The Leas; but, with all the care bestowed on him, he seemed slow in his recovery. Old Dr. Burleigh, the family physician, appeared somewhat puzzled about his patient, and, when cross-questioned by Mrs. Eliot, took professional refuge in the fastness of terms technical, which, if it did not indicate fog in his own mind, at least produced it in other people's. Nor did Dick himself deem it well to throw any light upon the main cause of his malady. Of his untoward meeting with the Drummonds nothing was known save to the three persons immediately concerned; for our hero maintained an obstinate silence as to his adventures on the eventful night which preceded his prostration, tacitly declining to refer to

them in any way. Conjecture (for the time being) was rife, but inquiry was not pressed; and no one ever dreamed of connecting his illness with the fact of Lydia Brooke's marriage. Charles Eliot, surmising at all possible scrapes and follies of unmuzzled youth, delicately invited his son's confidence, but seeing that none was readily forthcoming, he generously forbore interrogation.

"Take my word for it, Dale, the lad's love-sick! He's suffering from an aggravated attack of Oxford milliner, or a fit of porter's daughter, or something of that sort. I used to be a martyr to that kind of thing myself when I was his age—didn't you?"

Mr. Dale yawned. "Don't recollect, I'm sure. Aunt Dorothy kept a list of my juvenile ailments, I believe; she can tell you what I went through, no doubt."

"Ah; you evidently escaped more easily than I did. Youth was one perpetual fever

with me—now high, now low—and my heart was as inflammable as the cargo of an emigrant ship.”

“Poor child !” laughed Dale. “You must have been as bad, I should think, as Chaucer’s lusty bachelor—

‘So hote he lovēde, that by nightertale,
He slept no more than doth a nightyngale.’”

“Me to a T,” said Mr. Eliot. “But here’s my wife. Alicia, my dear, what’s the meaning of the word ‘nightertale?’”

It was mid-August before our hero was fairly on his feet again—a listless-looking biped, haunting the woods and fields, or wandering off to the lone sea-beach, where he would lie and watch the flickering blue monotony of water through half a summer day. He consumed a considerable quantity of verse at this period (chiefly Byronic in its tone), and he wrote a long unhappy poem which suggested, *inter alia*, that he had

recently been reading "Locksley Hall." This effusion was charged with the most uncompromising misanthropy, with the finest scorn in the finest writing; a Stygian gloom overshadowed its doleful numbers, and it spoke of woman as though, unlike her original tempter, she were really as black as she is painted.

However, it is not our intention to dwell upon the successive stages of Dick's disappointment, nor to give in detail the various symptoms that developed themselves. Callove, either when crowned or crossed, is undoubtedly apt to seem insipid to the matured taste; and, indeed, there are those who object to the dishing-up of veal in any form. Besides, the ground has already been gone over by Thackeray, in his history of Arthur Pendennis, with such wonderful humour and perception, that one may well hesitate to attempt reiteration.

And here we would say a word on our own behalf. It may possibly strike the acute critic (that dreadfully clever detective, who but yesterday proved poor Tom Crib's new and original comedy to be plagiarised from the Arabic of Aphra Ben Jonson) that the outline of our humble narrative, as far as it goes, is by no means unlike that of the novel of the great master we have just referred to. Pen, in his teens, falls a victim to Miss Costigan, as does our Dick to Miss Brooke; and it is probable that there are manifold points of damning similarity in the rise and fall of their respective passions. We can only say, in extenuation, that history repeats itself. Our fiction is fact; and we would ask the experienced reader if he has ever reflected in how many instances the early life of a young man might have been built, so to speak, on the "lines" of that of Thackeray's unheroic hero? For ourselves,

we do but utter that which we do know ; and if, as is only too likely, our *dramatis personæ* appear puppets, their speech inconsistent, their actions improbable, it must simply be ascribed to deficiency of art on our part as chronicler."

Dick Eliot, then, having got the better of his physical hurt, passed through sundry phases of mental unhealthiness, which assuredly left their mark upon his character. For his fever begat dejection, and dejection begat moodiness, and moodiness begat resentment, and resentment begat a sort of reckless antagonism to the wholesome decencies and respectabilities of life that fence us off from the surrounding wild. An evil spirit of unrest and defiance took hold upon him—a spirit that evinced itself in manifold ways. He smoked considerably more than was good for him ; turned his steps to the neighbouring city of Norwich with an ever-increasing

frequency, spending his hours in billiard-rooms and bar-parlours with a succession of indifferent acquaintances—idle, foolish youngsters, like himself, and the three or four godless seniors they deferred to as Mentors. In short, he went on “anyhow” (as latter-day slang expresses it), sowing his first crop of wild oats—alas! the enemy sowing tares!—and learning all too early such lessons of that unholy trinity, the world, the flesh, and the devil, as tend to the completion of man’s education.

Thus the long vacation passed by—not in the intoxicating glow and glamour poor Dick had fondly anticipated, but in disappointment and bitterness and rebellion of heart. Nothing of any special import occurred from the beginning until the end of his holiday, when Mr. Oscar Dale got up a picnic, as a sort of farewell entertainment for his young friend, inviting to Idlewild, amongst others, Miss Oglevie and her father.

“ You remember Margaret Oglevie, do you not, Dick ?” asked Mrs. Eliot ; “ although it must be some years now since you met her. I dare say you will find her much altered. She was always a little strange, even as a child ; but I think she has improved of late.”

“ I remember her,” said Dick, “ But it must be quite four summers ago since last she spent a day here when I was at home. She was fond of listening to the rooks, and used to say that some of them were probably a hundred years old, and knew my great-grandmother when she was a girl. And she wondered what kind of a girl my great-grandmother had been, and seemed surprised I had never done so too. And I recollect she asked me if I didn’t think our plantation was like the Wood of Error, where Una and the Knight went ; or whether I fancied it the one that Comus lived in ? I told her I

didn't know who Comus was, and she said I evidently didn't know much, then! And she wanted to hear what books I read most, and who my favourite heroes were. I wonder if I should recognise her again! What is she like now?"

"She's grown rather a tall girl," said Mrs. Eliot; "and she dresses, I must say, somewhat oddly. Those blacks and greys and whites of hers are inoffensive enough in one sense, no doubt; but I always hold it well for a young woman to pay due respect to the prevailing fashion, and to avoid anything like singularity. Now those hats she wears——"

"My dear," interposed Mr. Eliot, mildly, "you are describing her clothes, not herself. I suppose, though, that's the natural feminine wont. I wonder how Lilith described Eve, who had no garments to be criticised. Found fault with the way she did her hair, perhaps?"

“Possibly, Charles, you or Mr. Dale would be better at giving Miss Oglevie’s portrait. Will you not favour us, Mr. Dale?”

“I, my dear Mrs. Eliot! Worst hand in the world at description. The most I could do would be to give an inventory of her, after Olivia’s fashion, in *Twelfth Night*—‘as, item, two lips, indifferent red; item, two grey eyes, with lids to them; item, one neck, one chin, and so forth.’ No; Dick must wait till Thursday, and then he’ll see the young lady in person. Better read up for her, Dick, meanwhile, or you’ll never pass.”

Thursday came—a day silent and sweet, in the late September, when all outdoor sound had grown sleepy, and the thin mist of autumn made the distance a dream. Summer had left the land, and the swallows had flown after her. Flowers, like elder sisters whose season was over, were reluctantly

giving place to fresh-cheeked fruits, and the glories of gardens and fields were gradually yielding to the ruddier beauties of orchards and woods.

Cottage children, bronzed by the sun, might now be met in troops, with blackberry-stained mouths, and faces smeared with purple, looking like wild Indians in their war-paint. The hushed woods, no longer, as in mid-August, "green-dense and dim-delicious," were possessed by an odorous twilight, in which the subtle fragrance of the pine, the faint, cool smell of moss and fern, and the ancient earthy savour of fallen leaves, penetrated the brain with their mingled fumes, awaking a crowd of tender memories and vague regrets as one lingered amid the trees.

And the trees themselves ! The yellowing poplar, a pale-flamed torch ; the maple, with its fierce tropical flush of colour ; the tawney-

hued plane and sycamore; the spotted orange of the horse-chestnut; and the puritanical brown of oak and beech, which stood up rebukefully among their livelier-clad brethren, like Christian and Faithful among the flaunting plumes and Babylonish doublets of "Vanity Fair."

There was ample opportunity given this day to note the varying splendours and sadness of autumnal foliage, for at Idlewild flourished a grand old wood, covering many a broad acre of ground; and it was part of its owner's programme to have luncheon taken within its leafy cloisters. A goodly sprinkling of county and city folk had responded to the invitations of Oscar Dale, whose kinswoman, Mrs. Allan Dale, of Little Upton, willingly undertook the part of hostess to his guests.

Mrs. Dale, indeed, was quite in her element at this post, and did the honours of

Idlewild with the utmost affability and self-satisfaction. She was a glib-tongued, rather pretty little woman, as harmless as was compatible with entire foolishness ; but since her sister Theresa's marriage to old Lord St. Bees she had become a somewhat monotonous creature to converse with, saddling her auditor with that venerable nobleman as remorselessly as Sindbad was saddled with the Old Man of the Sea, and thrusting greatness upon one in the person of my lady his wife, until the burden grew beyond human endurance. Better honest Allan, and his shorthorns, with their pedigrees and prize-winnings, than Mrs. Allan, with her interminable chronicle of Belgravian small-beer.

The Eliots, as near neighbours and friends, were about the earliest arrivals, and found their host and Mrs. Dale in what, in Idlewild, was called the blue drawing-room.

The two ladies greeted each other with effusion. Mrs. Dale mentally condemned Mrs. Eliot's bonnet, and forthwith appealed to her good taste on a question of mural decoration.

“Do you know, Oscar intends having the dining-room repainted. And, fancy, my dear Mrs. Eliot! he wants those dreadful split things the Oglevies have—pomegranates, are they not? I'm sure I shall never enjoy a dinner here again if he does have them. I don't know how they affect you, but they always make me yawn—they do, indeed! And it's so provoking; because, of course, they are not at all the right thing now—not in the least! Dear Theresa writes me that nothing has been seen this season but chrysanthemums and storks; walls, curtains, carpets, chintzes, china—everywhere! Isn't it delightful? Quite *too* original! Last year, you know, it was sunflowers and

lizards; and next year—Oh, Oscar! what *did* the Duchess tell Theresa was to be next year?”

“Ducks and green peas next year—sage-green, of course,” said Mr. Dale, gravely. “Or else what-do-you-call-’em?—lambs; lambs and wild mint—whichever you happen to like best. But I believe the ducks will be the more correct; especially as we are to have them drawn like dodos. Nothing, you know, can be quainter than that! Your dodo is the most fearful wild-fowl living; and, combined with the peapods, I think the effect will be charming. Don’t you, Eliot?”

“Peapods are no end artistic,” said Mr. Eliot, sternly repressing his smile, and speaking *en connoisseur*. “And that subtle etherealising of ducks and peas into dodos and pods is worthy of the true poet. If it isn’t calculated to strike terror in the

stoutest heart, and raise a blush on the cheek of modesty, why, I don't know what is !”

“My *dear* Charles, how very absurdly you're talking ! Fortunately, Mrs. Dale knows what you are. Men complain of the silliness of women, but really, the nonsense they themselves often utter outdoes ours altogether. Don't you think so, Mrs. Dale ?”

“Oh, I do ! And there's no excuse for men whatever ; because it isn't as though their nonsense were unintentional, like ours ; but they actually talk it on purpose ! And that reminds me, dear Mrs. Eliot—*have* you heard what Mr. Disraeli said the other day to St. Bees ? No ! Ah, then——”

“Pardon, me cousin,” interposed Oscar Dale, anxious to avert the threatened torrent of small talk ; “but I fancy I see the Oglevies coming up the drive ; and

there's someone else behind them. It must be later than we thought."

Presently, the Oglevies appeared; and closely in their wake came a succession of guests—the Wyatts of Beechley, the Ariels of Waste Court, the Pitts of Brookham, Draycott of Draycott Manor, Polly Boddyman and the Rector, the Farrs, Nevilles, and Ellinghams from Norwich—until the party was found complete. There was an aimless half-hour or so spent in lingering within the house and about the lawn and garden, but at length a start was made for the wood. Some few of the ladies remained behind to be conveyed with the luncheon in the wagonette, but the majority preferred the walk across the park. Just before setting off, it chanced that Dick Eliot renewed his acquaintance with Miss Oglevie. And it happened in this wise.

He was standing in the recess of one of

the drawing-room windows, looking out on the lawn, when, through the hum of conversation within, he heard a voice close behind, saying :

“It’s like a poem of Keats’.”

At this he turned, and saw a young lady bending over a small bronze vase, having figures of nymphs and satyrs winding round it, and containing a cluster of faint creamy roses with brown autumn ferns among them. The tone of the voice was singularly clear and thoughtful, and Dick felt that he should like to hear it again. So when the speaker looked up, he came forward a step from the window.

“Hah, Dick !” said Oscar Dale, who was standing beside the young lady. “You know Miss Oglevie, of course ? Auld lang syne—boys together, and all that weren’t you ? Excuse me, please, I must see about getting my company off. It’s like launching a ship.”

And with this he left them.

“Is it really Richard Eliot?” said Miss Oglevie, holding out her hand to Dick with a smile. “I’m so glad to meet you again. It’s a small age, you know, since I saw you last ; but I remember that summer I used to come over to The Leas, when you were home from Rugby. And I’ve not forgotten the rooks, or the rabbits, or anything. How’s Lop, M.P. ?”

“Lop, M.P. ?”

“Ah, you don’t remember ! What a shame ! Can’t you recollect that delightfully absurd story your father told us about your rabbits ? About the big grey one, with ears hanging down like the lappets of the Speaker’s wig—the one he called the member for the burrow ? Why, it was almost a fore-taste of ‘ Alice in Wonderland.’ ”

Dick didn’t recollect at all, so he said, vaguely :

“I think I remember something about it.”

But Margaret Oglevie saw through the pretence directly, and characteristically declined to tolerate it.

“I think you do nothing of the sort! Own frankly you’ve forgotten. Pray, what did Lop, M.P., say when he was presented to the Hare Apparent? You see you don’t know! Let’s talk of something else.”

Dick was somewhat disconcerted at being so promptly found out and fearlessly taxed with his small deceit; annoyed, too, with himself—an Oxford man—for not feeling more entirely at ease beneath the girl’s clear grey eyes. That freedom, that frankness of speech of hers—why could not he also be equally natural? Doubtless she would think him stiff and conventional—women were so shallow in their judgment, so hasty in their conclusions; and if she did thus misinterpret him, he couldn’t help it.

Such were Dick's inmost reflections as he traversed the yet dewy slopes and rises of the park at Miss Oglevie's side, whilst to right and left, in straggling procession, their fellow-pilgrims to the wood were making the still September noontide glad with voices. As for his companion, she was wholly disposed to find pleasure in this renewal of an early acquaintance.

Of late she had heard frequent mention of our hero, alike from his father and from Mr. Dale, and much that she had heard had interested her. She was, moreover, a creature of wide and ready sympathies, taking a keen, unflagging relish in the study of surrounding character, in the common needs and aspirations, and toils, and triumphs of everyday humanity. And if, as was oftentimes inevitable, people fell miserably short of the generous estimate she had formed of them, jarring on her with meannesses, ignoble

self-serving, and the pitiful lack of charity, she was ever more apt to take reproach to herself for misunderstanding and faulty judgment than to condemn those who were the real sinners. In which shifting of the burden of blame she seldom missed the concurrence and approval of the culprits themselves.

“How deliciously quiet [and quieting this wood is!” exclaimed Margaret, as they entered within its shade. “To me there seems such a sense of tender patience about these autumn days, that makes their beauty all the more beautiful.”

“I like woods, and I like autumn,” said Dick, insensibly yielding to the dreamy influences about him; “and I like them both together. This wood especially is a favourite of mine; so is that at Hethercote. As a rule, I think I like places better than people.”

“Ah, that shows how young you are,” said Miss Oglevie, in a tone of such quiet assurance, that, although inwardly resenting the statement, Dick could not help suspecting there must be something in it. “Now, Nature can never attract me as human nature does ; so *I* prefer people to places.”

“Naboth to Naboth’s vineyard, I suppose?” said Dick, with a touch of sarcasm ; then, gloomily (as though a cloud, letting forth a momentary flash, should straightway resume its natural sombreness), “People are deceitful.”

“Some, no doubt.”

“Most,” said the young man, with a tragic sententiousness.

Miss Oglevie glanced at him inquiringly, but Dick walked on in silence, his eyes turned moodily earthward. Margaret felt that their talk had started on a wrong track, and resolved to turn it in another direction.

So presently she began speaking of some story by a well-known writer, which was then in course of publication in a magazine, and which everybody was supposed to be reading. Did Dick like it? No, he didn't. What did she think of it herself? Think? Nothing at all. One didn't *think* of such a thing. The writer certainly had not; why should the reader? How did he guess it would end?

"As far as we've got at present," said Dick, "it seems to me even betting whether the heroine will turn Jew and elope with the money-lender, or act like a Christian and bolt with the Bishop."

Margaret laughed.

"I think you are rather sarcastic," she said. "But then the story is amazingly silly, no doubt. Why *do* people write who have no sort of vocation, no spark of ability, for such work? I see the *Saturday* and

Athenæum perpetually putting this query ; but of making many books there is no end, notwithstanding. Papa says nowadays persons call themselves men of *letters* who have not even mastered the A B C of their art. What I should like to have established with regard to literature is some such arrangement as prevails in the dear old fairy tales, where the suitors compete for the hand of the Princess and lose their heads if they fail to solve the three enigmatical questions set them. The novelist's three volumes should represent the three questions, and if they failed at these——"

(Here Margaret slightly bowed her head, and drew the edge of her hand significantly across the back of her neck.)

"And if they succeeded?" said Dick.

"If they succeeded, they should marry the fair and lovely princess, of course—or at least have some equivalent award. Such a

plan would give us enough good novels, and relieve us of more than enough bad novelists. Literary aspirants would know the penalty of non-success, and only the ablest would venture to go up for examination. The main difficulty, I fancy, would be in electing judges competent to decide on the passing—or ‘ploughing,’ don’t you say?—of the candidates.”

When Margaret Oglevie spoke on any subject she was interested in, she generally had the gift of interesting her hearers also, for she spoke with freshness and enthusiasm. Once fairly started (as now) on so congenial a topic as that of books and their belongings, she could hold her own in a conversation of almost any length, her varied reading and critical appreciation of things read making her remarks really worthy the utterance. For a while our hero hearkened to the voice of the charmer with comparative

unheedfulness, nor readily came forth from the morbid self-engrossment which had latterly possessed him. Like Hawthorn's Coverdale, he was an epicure of his own emotions, and naturally exaggerated the sentiments of youthful love and despair it had been his fate to experience, giving them, respectively, heights and depths which were truly sublime. He felt, and fostered, a kind of melancholy pride in that he had done, borne, and suffered something beyond the average of his years, and flatteringly regarded himself as a person of painfully romantic interest. But, despite his tragic heart history, the birds sang, and the sun shone, and Margaret Oglevie talked; and before long he found himself lending ear unto her speech with involuntary relish.'

She spoke of prose authors and poets, of living singers and the "dead kings of melody," of writers grave and of writers gay

—and all with as much sympathy and sincerity, as much spontaneous ardour and affection, as the generality of young womanhood reserves for new bonnets, new babies, and the like. Not that she was without a natural feminine sentiment both for bonnets and babies ; but this sentiment was neither ostentatious nor paramount with her. Her predilection was rather that of the gentle clerke of Oxenford :

“For him was lever han at his beddes heed
A-twenty bookes clothed blak and reed.”*

Hitherto Dick had never known a woman talk in this wise, and it astonished and attracted him not a little. For an Oxonian,

* As some partial indication of Miss Oglevie's literary favouritism at this time, we may mention that the couple of small shelves wontedly hanging at her “beddes heed” actually did contain a score of books ; and that, of this number, poetry was represented by Shakspeare, Browning, Percy's “Reliques,” and the Bible, whilst prose found expression in sundry volumes of Swift and De Quincy, ditto of Thackeray and George Eliot, Lamb's “Essays,” and Holmes' “Autocrat.”

he was by no means ill-read himself—especially among our later poets—but, somewhat to his chagrin, he found that his acquaintance with general literature beside that of his companion was nothing better than conventional. In other words, he knew as much about it, as a whole, as a Pope's bull may be said to know of oilcake.

In the wood at Idlewild was a glade, and in this glade had been consumed the luncheons of successive picnic-parties time out of mind. Here Belinda had come, in hoops and patches, and, seated on the green sward with Sir Plume at her feet, had discussed sentiment and salad, the blue sky above her, and the black ant beneath. Here had Corydon sported with Amaryllis in the shade, heedless alike of earwigs and the maternal dread of damp. Lads and lasses—*puellæ puerique*—had eaten, drunk, and been merry in this leafy spot through many a

bright bygone day ; and the fragments of many an *al fresco* feast had fallen to the resident birds and squirrels. It was a place that almost seemed made for taking rest and refreshment in ; at once sheltered, picturesque, and softly turfed.

On the present occasion the party was a decided success. It forgot its mustard, mislaid its corkscrew, brought insufficient bread—a mere Falstaffian farthing's-worth in proportion to its supply of wine !—and upset its sours among its sweets according to the established wont.

Some interesting discoveries were thus made of the secret affinities of ingredients hitherto held antagonistic ; and Charles Eliot broached the theory that currant jelly was first mated with mutton through the happy accident of being thrown together at a picnic, adducing, as a parallel piece of chance revelation, the excellence of the preserved ginger

and pigeon-pie which had casually foregathered on his plate.

Amidst the general animation and merriment of this midday meal, our hero was somewhat absent-minded. His talk with Margaret Oglevie, brief as it was, had given him much food for thought ; had touched his sympathies, kindled his imagination, and left him with new-born perceptions of intellectual life stirring in his brain. Many of us, probably, can remember when some such influence first came to us—whether from man or woman, or the chance reading of a book—and can recall how, from that hour, the aspect of things began to alter to our eyes ; how the old beliefs and preferences dropped from us, one after another—discarded for the burning and shining lights that a wider-reaching vision revealed us.

For a while we are bewildered by the sudden flash of perceptive power, full of shift-

ing doubts and distrust. The familiar objects of faith we have cherished aforetime satisfy us no longer ; we detect their flaws and deficiencies ; and we stretch forth eagerly in search of something to lay hold of and stand by, something to take the place of the dethroned loves and banished confidences of yesterday.

Whoso has known such phase of intellectual experience as we have thus roughly indicated, will perhaps understand something of Dick Eliot's preoccupation at this time. Mrs. Allan Dale, noticing him standing aloof with idle hands, incontinently beckoned him to her assistance.

" Oh, Mr. Richard, pray come and help me ! *Have* you a corkscrew ? No ? Then *will* you cut this ham for me ? So many people with cold veal, you see ; and all at a standstill for want of ham. It's *too* absurd, really ! "

"But I can't carve," said Dick, absently taking the knife and fork held out to him.

"That doesn't matter at all. Please cut it! You can't make any mistake."

This was to be proved.

Dick mechanically drooped on his knees before the task assigned him, and went through a preliminary act of pig-sticking by driving the fork overhand into the yielding crest of the huge uncut ham, that erewhile had graced the pride and paragon of the sty at Little Upton.

Next he proceeded to use the knife; but his thoughts were far from his work, and instead of slicing delicately downward in the orthodox fashion, he caused his weapon to describe a lateral movement from right to left, carving, in fact, as one would carve a round of beef. The consequence was, he produced a succession of slices of pure

unqualified fat ; and it was whilst calmly pursuing this novel course of cutting (which had something soothing and satisfactory to his mind, in the ease wherewith the knife-blade passed through the unresisting flesh) that Oscar Dale accosted him, Miss Oglevie's plate in his hand.

“ Some ham, Dick, for a lady ; so just look sharp ! ”

“ Does she like lean ? or—I'm afraid this ham is rather fat,” said Dick, suddenly coming down from the clouds.

Mr. Dale adjusted his eye-glass, and bent over the dish for critical examination.

“ It *does* look fat ; one of Allan's wretched prize-pigs perhaps. Really, I think I never saw so much fat on a ham before ! ”

“ It's nothing else,” said Dick, making another circular slice, and eying it with growing disgust. “ What's the matter ? What the deuce are you laughing at ? ”

“Well,” exclaimed Mr. Dale, with suppressed mirth, “this beats cock-fighting! beats — beats carpets! beats *everything*! Why, man alive! look how you’ve been cutting it!—the unkindest cut of all, by Jove!”

Dick did look, and an expression of blank dismay gradually overspread his features.

“Good heavens! What in the world will Mrs. Allan think! You won’t split on me, will you, Dale? What’s to be done? Let’s hide the wretched thing away among the fern there, and say—say——”

“Say two she-bears came out of the wood and eat it all up?” suggested Mr. Dale, glibly. “I’m afraid that won’t wash, young man!—story’s been tried before. No, no! Keep on cutting, and you’ll get at the lean directly; then we can sort it in with the rest, and perhaps nobody’ll notice.”

So Dick Eliot sliced away with the despe-

rate energy of despair, and, screened from observation by his unscrupulous companion, succeeded in consummating his atrocity undetected. But it effectually opened his eyes to the danger of day-dreaming in society, and for the remainder of the afternoon he contrived to keep sufficiently wide awake for ordinary requirements.

In the late September,

“That shades its sad eyes from the rising sun,
And weeps at eve because the day is done,”

the hours of light and warmth are of but brief duration ; and, warned by the breeding mists and falling dew, Mr. Dale's party was early in breaking up.

A majority of his guests tarried at Idlewild for five o'clock tea ; but these did not prolong their stay, and by shortly after six all had departed save the Eliots and Oglevies, who had been persuaded to remain to dinner.

It was a pleasant repast, this same dinner ; as such impromptu gatherings are often apt to be. There was plenty of humorous comment on the day's events from Mr. Eliot, Margaret Oglevie, and Oscar Dale ; some not ill-natured sarcasm from Ralph Oglevie ; much confidential criticism between the two matrons ; and a fund of able listening on the part of our hero. Under oath of secrecy, and with Dick's tacit consent, Mr. Dale privately imparted to Miss Oglevie a highly dramatic version of his young friend's dealings with the unhappy ham from Little Upton, whereby the lady's gravity was sorely tried ; and, on the subsequent ride home, her father found occasion to remonstrate seriously with her upon the habit of apparently causeless laughter which she seemed in danger of contracting.

In the drawing-room, after dinner, the small party of seven became divided (like the

“all Gaul” of his school-days’ Cæsar, mused Dick) into three parts.

This arrangement was brought about accidentally. Mr. Oglevie invited Charles Eliot to a game of chess, and that gentleman, protesting against the mental exertion, but influenced, as he explained, by the acquiescent philosophy of the newly-dined, accepted the challenge. Oscar Dale looked on ; at intervals addressing himself to his remaining guests. Of these, Mrs. Eliot and Mrs. Dale were seated on the couch by the fireside, talking domestic “shop,” whilst Miss Oglevie and our hero were at the piano in the small inner chamber, which, by looping back the curtains at its arched entry, formed a convenient supplement to the larger room.

Dick had a very real feeling for music (as Margaret Oglevie soon discovered), and a heart that would “throb to the gathered grieving of Beethoven, sway to the light

coquetting of Mozart " with the keenest and readiest response.

After awhile his companion tried him with Chopin, and Dick heard the subtle harmonies of this most rarely poetic of composers for the first time. He was entranced. The strange yearning passion and pathos of nocturne and sonata held him spellbound. Longing and tender regret, wild questioning and weird prophecy, sorrow, and struggle and aspiration were in the music, bearing one along on the devious tide of tone under troubled skies, and by dim wind-vexed woods and the voiceful haunts of men.

There are some unfortunates — people sluggish of sense, " whose blood is very snow-broth "—to whom music is a mere mechanical combination of sounds, tickling the ear, but leaving the soul untouched. Alas, for these oyster-hearted ones ! How shall they appreciate Paradise ?

"That's a very pretty piece you've just played us, Miss Oglevie," said Mrs. Dale, looking round, with a gracious smile, as the music ceased. "Thank you so much! There are times, you know, when that kind of thing suits one to a nicety."

To a nicety! Dick winced, and glanced first at Margaret Oglevie, then at Oscar Dale, who at the moment had approached the piano.

Mr. Dale shrugged his shoulders.

"Some one," said he reflectively—"Victor Hugo, I think—once remarked of the utterance of a fellow-poet that it made him experience a new sort of shudder; and really there are certain expressions—Well, well! my cousin (bless her) is no musician, Miss Oglevie. You were playing Chopin, were you not? I saw it written of him the other day that he could no more prick down a commonplace idea than could Milton a platitude, or Bacon a paradox."

"I like that!" said Margaret.

"Won't you go on playing?" petitioned Mr. Dale. "Please do; and let us hear his 'Marche Funèbre,' if you have it. I've not had a chance of listening to it since I left Paris."

Somehow or other, Mr. Dale's arrival at the piano appeared to Dick to act as an eclipse. It seemed to put him in the shade. For Mr. Dale evinced an enviable familiarity with all those wonderful lights of art and song which as yet were unknown gods to our hero, although evidently revered as *dii majores* by Miss Oglevie.

In her Olympus the deities were other than Dick in his simplicity had worshipped; and the names of Browning and Leighton, of Pater, Morris, Rossetti, Burne Jones, Blake, Chopin, and the like, evoked no divine associations in his mind. Hence, the latter part of the evening, satisfactory enough to two of our trio—as deep they went

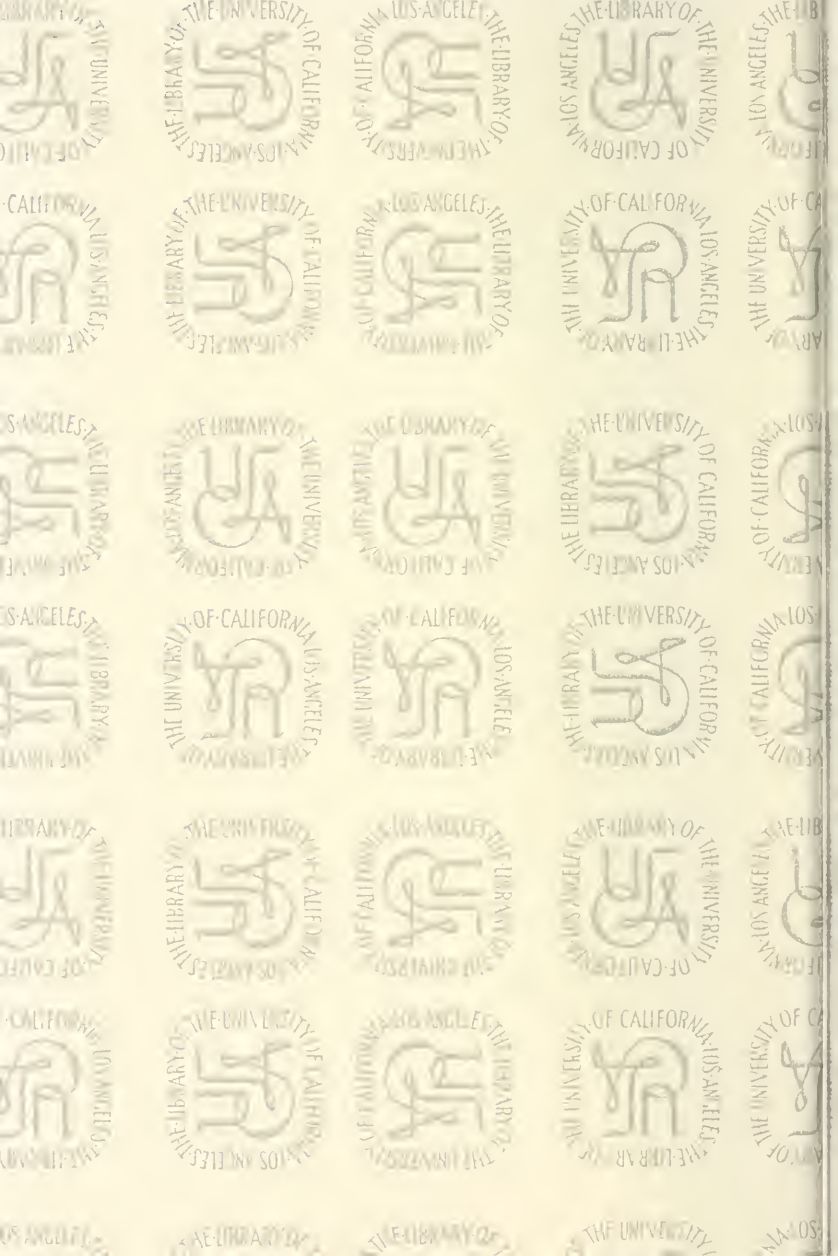
“—into the merit
Of this and that distinguished spirit”

—was scarcely so pleasurable to the third. He was mortified at discovering how much he was wholly ignorant of, and vowed in his heart that he would not again be thus placed at a disadvantage.

Apparently Margaret Oglevie divined something of his feeling, for presently she broke short her discussion with Mr. Dale, and addressed herself to Dick. Her parting words, moreover, were a reminder to him of his promise to call at The Coppice ere returning to Oxford.

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